

2013 Golden Jubilee edition

BIHAR YOGA®

The Golden Collection 1

A collection of original publications
from the Bihar Yoga Tradition



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

The Golden Collection 1



1963–2013
GOLDEN JUBILEE

WORLD YOGA CONVENTION 2013
GANGA DARSHAN, MUNGER, BIHAR, INDIA
23rd–27th October 2013

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First published by Bihar School of Yoga as *Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas* 1973, *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas* 1974, *Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas* 1974, *Blood Pressure Management through Yoga* 1973, *Teachers's Manual for Teaching Yoga to Children* 1971.

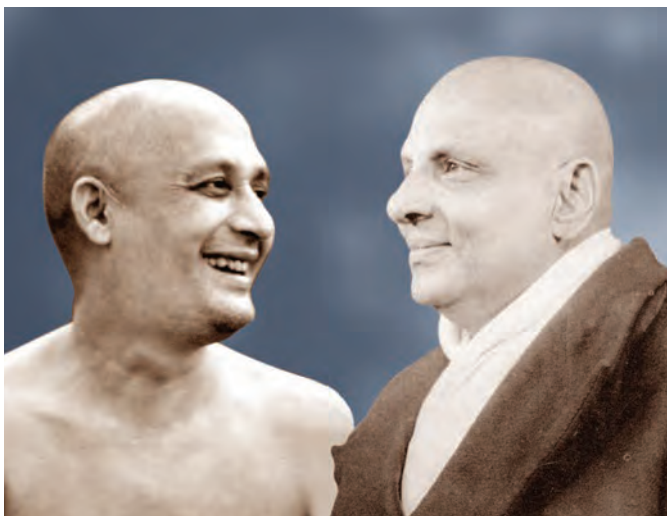
Published by Yoga Publications Trust
First edition 2013

ISBN: 978-93-81620-50-2

Publisher and distributor: Yoga Publications Trust, Ganga Darshan,
Munger, Bihar, India.

Website: www.biharyoga.net
www.rikhiapeeth.net

Printed at Aegean Offset Printers, Greater Noida



Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga
and to our guru Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati
who continues to inspire and guide us
on our spiritual journey.*

Swami Niranjan

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Preface

In the early 1970s and 1980s, the devotees of Sri Swami Satyananda carefully printed and published his lectures, discourses and class transcripts in small booklets, preserving and disseminating these important teachings. The booklets were their first contribution to their guru's mission of 'spreading yoga from door to door and shore to shore'. For many years these gems from the past have been out of print and unavailable. On the occasion of the Bihar School of Yoga's Golden Jubilee 2013 celebrations, these lost works have been compiled into a set of volumes aptly named *The Golden Collection*, so that once again the classic words which launched a yoga movement can inspire spiritual aspirants around the world.

In reproducing the booklets the original language has been kept intact, conveying the flavour of the time. The language shows the care that Sri Swami Satyananda took to make his teachings clear to his audience, never compromising clarity for fashion or style. His ability to present and adjust any topic to any audience is proof of the versatility which enabled him to convey his deep understanding of the potential of yoga to meet the needs of all.

A pioneer of his time, Sri Swami Satyananda gave a new dimension to the practice of asana, stating clearly that it can take the practitioner far beyond physical wellbeing. He often guided his disciples through letters brimming with snippets

of wisdom, which are as valuable and pertinent today as they were almost fifty years ago. *The Golden Collection* also includes a systematic introduction to the various meditation practices expounded by Sri Swami Satyananda. No step is missed and no precaution left out, allowing the aspirant to safely travel the journey of yoga and spiritual life. For each practice, whether antar mouna, ajapa japa or nada yoga, precision and clarity are the key. The branches of yoga are concisely elucidated, making them relevant to the daily life of each yoga aspirant.

Much that is taken for granted today was unknown or misunderstood at that time: it is the great achievement of Sri Swami Satyananda to have brought yoga to the general public and mainstream of society, truly making yoga a household word the world over.

The extraordinary quality of his being and spiritual attainments was recognized early in his life. While living in Rishikesh in the ashram of his guru, Swami Sivananda Saraswati, the young swami received glowing appreciation and admiration from guru-bhais, visitors and guests. To this day, tributes continue to express love and a sense of profound gratitude from all who have been touched by this modern day saint and his teachings. Sri Swami Satyananda, however, remained a disciple throughout his life and fulfilled his guru's mandate by making it his life's mission.

The Golden Collection is a true testimony to the wealth and depth of yoga and to its master exponent, Sri Swami Satyananda. In his early teachings he set the tone, purpose and aim of his mission. The reader is able to discover and connect with the roots of Satyananda Yoga, whilst appreciating its evolving contemporary nature, a trademark of this tradition.

Indeed, Sri Swamiji's prophecy, "yoga is the culture of tomorrow", has come true. His tomorrow is our today.



Yogasana

Yogasana is from the introductory chapter on asana found in the book Yoga & Kriya, 1981, by Swami Satyananda Saraswati. The book is the result of a three-year postal course on yoga and kriya and its lessons are a compilation of the teachings of Swami Satyananda spanning the period from 1973 to 1975.

The meaning of the Sanskrit word *asana* is ‘a steady and comfortable posture’. It is often believed that asanas are physical exercises. And of course this is true, they do have a profound influence on the body, but this does not convey their full significance. Each person is made up of three aspects: body, mind and consciousness, which merge together to constitute the whole being. Asanas aim at influencing all these three aspects and moulding and yoking them into one harmonious whole.

As such, one should try to think of asanas not as physical poses but as states of being. Correct performance of asanas requires participation of one’s whole being, with awareness of oneself in relation to the physical position and movement, the breath, relaxation of the muscles and so forth. If asanas were only physical exercises, it would be quite acceptable to think about work, breakfast or whatever while performing them. But this is not the case. The practice of asanas requires active involvement of one’s entire being as fully as possible.

Health of mind and body

It is impossible to work actively in life with an unhealthy mind and body. This applies to work and play as well as to spiritual aspiration. The fundamental requirement is the healthiest possible mind and body. The ancient yogis realized this thousands of years ago and for this reason developed the system of asanas. The asanas were tested thoroughly by the personal experience of these pioneers. Asanas evolved slowly through practice, and because of this, they have withstood the test of time. The body and mind of man thousands of years ago was little different to the mind and body of man today. As such, asanas are as useful in the present age as they were to the ancient originators. Many modern systems, in all fields of activity, are often based only on a few years' experience. They rarely last for very long periods and are usually modified because of inadequacies in their makeup. Asanas, on the other hand, are a well-tested system for attaining mental and physical health.

The prime aim of asanas is to help us tread the path to higher consciousness so we can begin to understand and know our relationship with existence. We cannot even consider attaining higher awareness if we are ill with disease, aches and pains or mental depression. Therefore, the initial purpose of practising asanas is to eliminate these afflictions and disturbances. Asanas loosen up the joints of the body, stretch and tone the muscles and remove poisons which tend to accumulate in various parts of the body. They also harmonize the nervous system and with a gentle massage they improve the functioning of all the internal organs such as the heart, lungs, abdominal organs, endocrinal glands, blood vessels and so on. Slowly but surely, this leads to the best possible physical health.

The mind and body are not really separate entities; they are two parts of the human organism. The mind is the controller or the computer and the body is the machinery. They are closely interrelated. Improvement in the general

health of the body automatically helps to bring about positive mental changes.

Mental problems or tensions, as well as an unhealthy body are the prime causes of most diseases which afflict mankind. The body has remarkable auto-therapeutic powers. It naturally has great strength to resist the onset of disease by means of antibodies which counteract bacteriological growth. A body that is unhealthy and a mind that is tense tend to whittle away these powers, making the body more vulnerable to illness. Asanas help the body to resist disease by bringing the mind and body into the best possible condition. A body saturated with poisons and toxins is a breeding ground for germs and is conducive to attack by disease. Asanas help to purify the body and thereby prevent diseases occurring. Some ailments are caused by malfunctioning of internal organs: blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes and so on. Asanas prevent this by bringing all the relevant organs into good working condition, improving nerve connections and also by reducing chronic mental stress, the latter being the root cause of most of the problems in the first place.

Asanas not only prevent disease; they also help to eliminate many types of diseases for the same reasons as given in the previous paragraph.

The influence of asanas on one's mental outlook

The stepping stone to higher awareness and a happy life is an optimistic attitude. Asanas help to change and reorientate a person's mental outlook.

Firstly, asanas greatly influence the functioning of the endocrine system. This system exerts vast control over our lives. It carries out an uncountable number of indispensable functions within the body and it influences our physical appearance, emotional outlook and, in fact, much of our behaviour and attitude towards life. A person who has a healthy endocrine system is generally optimistic, clear in thought and positive in action. A person with a system that is out of balance will tend to be unhealthy, pessimistic and either excessively

active or inactive physically and mentally. Endocrinology is a very interesting science encompassing reproduction, digestion, emotional reactions and all aspects of life.

The endocrine system consists of various glands located throughout the body, which secrete special substances called hormones. Each of these hormones has a specific function to perform in the body. They act as triggers which prompt the various organs into higher or lower levels of activity as required, or in some cases such as women's menstrual cycle, they initiate and terminate various processes. These hormones also interact with and modify the activities of each other. For optimum health the entire system must be in balance and perfectly coordinated with each gland secreting the required hormone in the right quantity at the right time. If there is disharmony in the endocrinal system, there will be a malfunction in one or more of the bodily processes and possibly in the emotional makeup of one's personality. There is such an intricate interrelationship between the various glands that one malfunctioning gland can cause disruption to the whole system. Asanas are designed to rectify over-activity or sluggishness of individual glands as well as harmonize the control centre of the system in the brain. This is why even simple asanas can sometimes bring about astonishingly quick benefits.

Endocrinal disorders are not usually organic – they are generally functional. In other words, the individual glands are capable of working correctly but don't, perhaps because of stress or misuse of the body. This can be compared to a car. If the petrol mixture is too rich, or the air and petrol intake pipes are blocked, the car will cease to work or will not run smoothly. It still has the capacity to work properly and will do so when the necessary adjustments are made. With the endocrine system the functional breakdown may be due to ineffective nerve impulses or insufficient supply of oxygenated blood, perhaps due to incorrect breathing and so on. Asanas automatically and gently rectify this condition, bringing the system into proper working order again.

This system has a major influence on our emotional makeup, which is intimately connected with our mental processes. As such, improvement of this system alone through the practice of asanas can result in profound changes in our attitude to life.

Secondly, asanas bring about harmony in the various other bodily systems. These systems are rhythmical in nature and include the blood, nervous, respiratory, digestive as well as the endocrine system, which we have already mentioned. They are all intimately related to each other. When the proper working relationship between these bodily processes is lost there is a resultant loss of health and body efficiency. This has repercussions on our emotional and mental wellbeing. Asanas coordinate these various systems bringing rhythm and balance into the body-mind complex.

Thirdly, asanas have subtle influences on the body, which perhaps a physiologist would tend to deny. Surrounding and permeating the whole body is an energy field which is normally imperceptible to our senses. In yoga this is called the *pranamaya kosha*, energy sheath, and is commonly known as the etheric body by people who have developed their psychic potential. This concept should not be taken lightly, for scientists in Russia have actually detected and photographed this energy body. There it is called bioplasm or bioluminescence. This energy travels in and around the body in specific pathways, which in yoga are known as *nadis*. These pathways easily become blocked and prana becomes congested in certain areas, which can lead to physical and mental disorders. Asanas encourage free flow of prana and thereby facilitate good health. Further, this energy body is intimately connected to the mind. As such, the uninhibited flow of prana brought about by asanas, leads to mental equilibrium and calmness.

Fourthly, asanas automatically bring about a change in breathing. Rapid and irregular breathing signifies tension in mind and body, whereas slow, deep and rhythmical breathing indicates calmness and wellbeing. Asanas bring about mental

and emotional equanimity by slowing down the breathing and deepening the inhalation and exhalation.

Fifthly, awareness is an essential feature of the practice of asanas. While performing asanas one should be fully aware of what is being done and not allow the mind to wander here and there. Without awareness asanas are not really asanas, no matter how well they may be physically performed. This awareness of breath movement while doing asanas draws our attention away from the entanglement with superficial worries and problems, at least for a period of time. This includes relaxation of one's personality. It may be temporary, but it assists in bringing about permanent changes in a person's mental and emotional makeup.

Our emotional and mental attitudes as well as feelings are noticeably reflected in our physical poise and expressions. If we are angry we tend to hunch our shoulders; if we are tense and worried we frown; if we feel nervous we shake and breathe quickly and so on. Conversely, if we feel happy we simultaneously feel light and more flexible in the body. These are mental and emotional attitudes reflected in the body. This is also a two-way process – the body can induce corresponding changes in the mind. Asanas make the body relaxed, strong, light, supple, free of aches and pains and this in turn brings about emotional and mental calmness and confidence.

As we have already mentioned, asanas are very useful in eliminating diseases. This alone is conducive to mental and emotional stability. Let us take an example: constipation. This ailment is generally accepted by medical science to be caused initially by mental tension, though there are other factors such as lack of exercise and unsuitable food habits. When a person suffers from constipation there is also a feeling of heaviness, not only in the body, but also in the mind. The thinking processes become dulled and pessimistic. Asanas help to remove constipation so that one simultaneously becomes more light-hearted and carefree. By removing or easing physical ailments, asanas also bring

about a corresponding relaxation and freedom of one's personality.

All the previous factors that we have listed interrelate with each other. The overall result is a notable and positive change in one's subconscious and conscious thinking processes.

Asanas as a step to higher awareness

From the previous discussion it is clear that asanas exercise a profound influence on the mind-body complex. Regular practice of asanas helps to make one master of the mind and body, and not the slave. The beautiful, strong body aimed at in various body building systems, without a correspondingly developed mind, is as insufficient as a highly intellectual mind contained within a weak, sickly body. The ideal is to have both, a strong, healthy mind and body. This is the aim of asanas as well as yoga in general.

The practice of asanas should not be divorced from the other aspects of yoga. It is an integral part of yoga techniques with the purpose of leading each of us to higher awareness. This was why the ancient originators of yoga developed asanas and other yogic practices, though this is rarely considered today. The ancient yogis aimed at transcending the normal limitations of the mind and body. Their aim was to transcend individuality and to achieve self-realization. In this context, asanas were not intended specifically to develop the mind and body. This was a means to an end. Their aim was to make the body so perfect and the subconscious mind so calm and troublefree that these aspects of individual existence could be forgotten. Consciousness could be disentangled from the troubles of the mind and body. When the aches and pains and ailments of the body are removed and one is emotionally and mentally relaxed, then one automatically ceases to be aware of the physical body and the superficialities of the mind. In this way the fetters of individuality can be released and one's true nature – pure, infinite, all-pervasive consciousness – can be realized.

Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas

Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas offers a deeper understanding of this series of asanas. The booklet was produced for the Golden Jubilee Yoga Convention held in October 1973 in Munger, India.

Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati (compiler)

From 1970 to 1985, Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati (UK) lived at the Bihar School of Yoga, Munger, and other Satyananda Yoga ashrams throughout India. He was a key figure for the early publications of the Bihar School of Yoga. He made a thorough study of Samkhya, Tantra and Vedanta and of the prominent traditions of yoga in India. He has a deep esoteric knowledge of the traditions of other countries as well. He is the founder of Mandala Yoga Ashram in Wales, UK.

Swami Nishchalananda compiled *Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas*, *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas* and *Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas*.

Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas

Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Originally published as a booklet in 1974, *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas* gives practical guidance towards a profound experience and understanding of this series of asanas.

Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas

Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas is a booklet describing in depth performance and effects of nine asanas. This booklet was published in 1974 and was dedicated to Ma Dharmashakti, who “truly epitomizes the essence of yoga. May she continue to inspire others in the future as she has done in the past.”

Blood Pressure Management through Yoga

Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Sri Swami Satyananda recommends yoga practices and a change of lifestyle to manage an imbalance in blood pressure, both high and low. A complete eight-week training program is also given to guide and support the practitioner's effort to learn and master the asanas. Originally published in booklet form in 1973, *Blood Pressure Management through Yoga* encountered such interest that it was soon followed by a second edition in 1975.

Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati (compiler)

In June 1967 Swami Yogeshwarananda (The Netherlands) came to Munger to join the nine-month International Yoga Teachers Training course held from July 1967 to March 1968. On 2nd November 1967 she was initiated into sannyasa. Everyone was amazed at the remarkable quickness with which she assimilated not only the fundamentals but also the deep-rooted philosophies of yoga. She dedicated her life to yoga and the welfare of humankind.

Teacher's Manual for Teaching Yoga to Children

Swami Satya Vivekananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

The Teacher's Manual for Teaching Yoga to Children was first published in 1971 at a time of great unrest amongst the youth, not only in India, but around the world. In this manual, Sri Swami Satyananda skilfully brings together the theory and practice of yoga to meet with the needs of children. Teachers receive guidelines and a class plan as tools for their task of giving direction to the youth.

Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas

Swami Nishchalananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas offers a deeper understanding of this series of asanas. The booklet was produced for the Golden Jubilee Yoga Convention held in October 1973 in Munger, India.

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Swami Nishchalananda compiled *Health Benefits of Inverted Asanas*, *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas* and *Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas*.

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Preface

This book is the first in a volume which will discuss all the well-known and useful asanas. Forthcoming publications will discuss in turn all the various aspects, techniques and benefits of forward bending asanas, backward bending asanas, meditation asanas and so on.

This text is also one in a series of Yoga Reference Library Books written and published by sannyasins of Bihar School of Yoga in Munger, Bihar, India. All persons contributing to this series are swamis, initiated members of the ancient Shankaracharya Order of Sannyasins, who are participating in a three-year training course being given by Swami Satyananda Saraswati for 108 of his most devoted disciples. These texts are based on the sannyasins' own experiences in personal practice and teaching, and contain the teachings which they have received from their preceptor, Swami Satyananda Saraswati.

INTRODUCTION

Inverted poses affect the entire psycho-physiological body to an almost extraordinary degree. Non-practitioners of yoga are quite often given descriptions of the benefits of inverted asanas, which consist of a long list of superlatives. It is consequently difficult for these people not to believe that the claims are highly exaggerated. The only positive method of discovering the truth is for these people to practise these asanas for themselves. We, however, urge that they are performed correctly; otherwise the benefits will not be substantial, if they occur at all.

The inverted poses are almost indispensable for the majority of people of all age groups and all strata of society since they effectively improve and maintain good physical and mental health. They can produce an immediate and powerful sedation of the nervous system and are especially recommended for those people leading sedentary lives, who do a lot of brain work and who are bombarded by the stresses of present-day life.

One or more of these poses should be practised during times of tiredness, nervousness and unhappiness or when the brain feels dull or is unable to concentrate. Regular and diligent practice allows moods and emotions to be controlled and disciplined, can improve meditation and awaken spiritual awareness. Scientists believe that much of the capacity of the human brain is unused by most people. Yoga agrees completely with this idea and further says that man has latent faculties untapped by the average person, which can give powers of clairvoyance, telepathy, clairaudience, and so on. Whilst the nature of inverted poses will not allow any person to merely 'stand on his head' to obtain these powers, they can be of immense assistance in unleashing these faculties.

Inverted asanas, as described in this book, can be beneficially performed for spiritual purposes, maintenance of general good health and to relieve or cure the following ailments:

- Headache and migraine
- General fatigue or lack of vitality
- Loss or greying of hair
- Bad facial complexion
- Eye, nose and throat illnesses
- Constipation
- Indigestion
- Visceroptosis
- Malfunctioning of the sexual organs
- Varicose veins and haemorrhoids
- Diabetes
- Rheumatism
- Neurasthenia
- Insomnia
- Tension and anxiety
- Depression
- General psychological problems and other ailments.

ESOTERIC EXPLANATION OF THE EFFICACY OF INVERTED POSES

Eastern thought, in general, believes that life is activated by a cosmic force field (to use imprecise, but roughly equivalent English terminology), which is composed of two opposite, but complementary principles, forces, vibrations or currents: positive and negative, sun and moon, or yin and yang in Taoism. Scientific opinion has also tended to accept this idea during the last few decades; matter and energy were found to be but manifestations of the same thing, atomic physics demonstrated that matter and anti-matter could combine to produce nothing and Einstein proved that weight, length and time could, under the correct conditions, be reduced to zero or expanded to infinity. For thousands of years eastern philosophers have conceived that the entire universe, both animate and inanimate, is activated by these two opposite principles, and that nothing exists but by virtue of the ceaseless interplay of these two forces.

Considering this concept in relation to man, it follows that every cell, every organism, mental manifestation and in fact the whole body is dependent on the interaction of these two principles. Therefore, the malfunctioning or the healthy operation of all parts of the body, both physically and mentally, are subject to the influence of these two principles.

These ideas originated during an era, when man's consciousness was in all probability substantially different to the consciousness of present-day man. The ancients were probably able to experience and obtain awareness of forces which the majority of people today cannot appreciate. However, modern scientists are able to inform us that we live in an electromagnetic force field that emanates from and surrounds the earth and that we receive electromagnetically charged cosmic radiation from outer space. Many scientists also believe that life is electrical in nature; in other words, cellular, cerebral and nervous activities are electrical manifestations, consisting of the interplay of negative and positive electrical charges. It

would, therefore, seem more than possible that there is some interaction between the terrestrial and cosmic electrical forces and the similar forces in the human body.

Some eastern philosophies say that this does occur, though of course they do not speak in terms of electricity, they propound that the human body receives currents which travel from the sky to the earth and from the earth to the sky. In the upright position of the body, these two currents flow from head to feet and vice versa simultaneously. When the body is inverted, these currents reverse their normal direction in the body.

Now, if these currents are out of balance, illness or disease of the body occurs. It is believed that by changing the direction of these currents, they can regain equilibrium with the consequent beneficial effects on the body, both mentally and physically. It is also believed that ageing and the direction of time is associated with the upright position and the normal flow of these currents, and that by assuming an inverted position the ageing process and time itself is reversed. In this way, the usual direction of human development is reversed and youthfulness is achieved and maintained.

In yoga, the vital force that activates life is known as *prana*. This is divided into a solar and lunar flow. If they are in harmony with each other, then physical health and mental stability is assured, together with enhanced spiritual awareness. It is a subtle force which flows in channels known as *nadis* throughout the whole body, ensuring smooth functioning of all the organs and protecting the whole body against disease and death. It also acts on the subtle psychic centres of the body, allowing consciousness to become aware of them.

The pranic channels can become congested. By doing inverted poses, the direction of pranic flow can be reversed and the channels can be decongested. A gross analogy to illustrate this action is when a pipe becomes blocked. The sediment causing the blockage is easily removed by forcing a flow of fluid in the opposite direction to normal.

By maintaining unimpeded pranic channels, the life force can do its duties efficiently and correctly.

PHYSIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF THE GENERAL EFFECTS OF ALL INVERTED POSES

Whilst this book is not intended to be a physiological textbook, a better appreciation of the benefits of inverted poses can be obtained if relevant parts of the body are briefly described and then related to the influence of inverted poses on their functioning.

1. THE INFLUENCE OF THE MODIFIED BLOOD FLOW

Many people, particularly those leading sedentary lives, suffer from bad blood circulation to a lesser or greater extent. This partially starves the body tissues of the necessary nourishment for normal growth and regeneration. Only children and particularly active adults escape this civilized malady by ensuring that the body is used in the way that it is designed for. People who are faced with the dilemma of inactivity can help to rectify bad circulation by practising inverted poses.

The most profound change that takes place during inverted poses is an improved blood flow. This has repercussions on numerous functions of the body, the most important of which will be discussed in the following text.

a) The brain and endocrinal glands

The brain: Man is controlled physically and mentally by the brain. The nervous system, which spreads throughout the whole body and is the communication system of the human organism, is both directly or indirectly connected to the brain. The brain, by means of the nervous system, controls and coordinates all the functions of the body; the rhythmical systems, such as the circulatory and the respiratory, the voluntary movement of the limbs, the harmonious and unconscious operation of the digestive organs, intelligent perception of the sense organs.

The endocrinal system: The endocrinal glands supplement the nervous system and also exercise repercussions on our every thought and action. In a healthy body these two systems work in harmony with each other.

The endocrinal glands act as an integrating system; they coordinate changes in the activities of the body to face changing internal and external conditions. The central nervous system performs the same functions and the two systems work hand in hand. However, the important difference between them is that nervous reactions are quick and short-lived, whilst the endocrinal responses are slow and protracted and give permanent changes to the body. In other words, the nervous system gives speedy changes to the body, whilst the endocrinal system gives continuity to these changes.

The master controller of the endocrinal system, including the other endocrinal glands, is the pituitary gland which is about the size of a pea and is situated at the base of the brain. It has such intricate vascular and nervous interconnections with the hypothalamus in the brain, that scientists consider that it must form part of a neuroglandular complex which controls, or at least influences, all the organic activities in the body. As such, it exercises a profound affect on the metabolic, reproductive and other functions, which extensively determine the behaviour, energy and growth of the individual. Though it is small in size, compared to most of the other endocrinal glands, it produces a number of hormones which influence the activities of the other endocrinal glands.

Another endocrinal gland situated in the region of the brain is the pineal gland. The function of this gland is not certain and baffled scientists are still trying to unravel its secrets. They are, however, reasonably sure that it has an endocrinal role. In yoga many people consider this as a physiological equivalent of ajna chakra, which is associated with psychic powers, but this controversial topic will not be discussed in this book. One point of interest, however, is that it has an extremely high blood flow per unit weight, second

only to the kidneys, which tends to suggest that it must have an important functional duty, whatever it is.

The blood system of the brain: Before discussing the affects of the inverted poses on the brain, let us firstly appreciate a few awe-inspiring facts about the blood system in the brain. Compared to other parts of the body, the blood requirements of the brain are particularly prodigious. The average daily blood consumption of this organ is in the order of 2,000 litres. If all the capillaries of one gram of white matter composed of nerve fibres are put end to end they will attain a length of about 300 metres and the capillaries of one gram of grey matter composed of nerve cells when placed end to end will extend for one kilometre. These are average figures. The vascularization, the formation of blood vessels in an organ or tissue, varies in different parts of the brain. From these figures one can appreciate the density and complexity of the vascular system in the brain. Further, in certain regions of the brain, the vascular network is so dense and the capillaries are so fine, that some penetrate between enmeshed individual nerve cells and some even pierce them. Remember, these cells are extremely small, there being billions in the brain. This elaborate capillary system is absolutely necessary to ensure the vital supply of nourishment to these nerve cells. If this nourishment does not reach the cells, the efficiency of the brain will diminish.

The influence of inverted poses: When the body is inverted, the brain receives a richer supply of blood at a slightly increased pressure by the action of gravity. The capillaries are elastic and dilate or constrict, depending on the blood pressure. The increased blood pressure, during inverted poses, dilates the capillaries and also opens capillaries that have become closed. The effect is that the brain in general, including areas that have ceased to function, receives an increased amount of nourishment. This consequently rejuvenates brain cells. Accumulated toxins and waste materials are also effectively removed by the strong

flushing action of the blood and eventually eliminated from the body. Under these conditions, the brain, the associated endocrinal glands, and in turn all the parts of the body controlled by them are encouraged to function efficiently. The overall result is a general improvement in physical and mental health.

b) The heart and circulatory system

The circulation is the transport system of the body. The heart is the organ which provides the power to circulate the blood throughout the body, the blood is the conveying medium, the arteries and capillaries are the routes by which the blood supplies the body and the veins are the routes by which the blood is returned to the heart.

The heart: Before discussing the effects of inverted poses, consider first the almost unbelievable amount of work performed by the heart. Its size and shape are about the same as an average person's fist. Though most people severely mistreat it, by overeating or by excessive emotion, it never stops during our lives. On average it beats 70 times every minute, 4,200 times every hour, about 100,000 times every day or well over two billion times during an average lifespan. During normal activities of the body it pumps approximately 300 litres of blood throughout the body every hour through an estimated 25,000 km of blood channels, equal to roughly half the distance around the world. This flow rate rapidly rises during physical exercise. Thus any method that rests this robust organ, even for a short period of time, is certain to be beneficial.

Circulatory system: Consider now the function of the blood system. The heart receives blood saturated with the waste carbon dioxide, the by-product of the metabolism of the body, and pumps this blood to the lungs, where the carbon dioxide is exchanged for oxygen. This fresh oxygenated blood then flows from the lungs to the heart again, from where it is pumped through the arteries and capillaries to every part of the body. The blood also

flows through the liver and alimentary canal, where it picks up nourishment from digested food. It conveys this nourishment, together with the oxygen, to all parts of the body to provide building material for new cells and to provide energy for the muscles. Whilst continuously eliminating carbon dioxide from the body, the circulatory system simultaneously transfers other waste materials of bodily activity to the kidneys and skin for excretion.

The influence of gravity: In the sitting and standing positions, the heart must pump the blood into the brain and other parts of the body above the heart against the force of gravity. This slows down the arterial blood flow and reduces the blood supply to the upper regions. The heart is, of course, assisted by gravity during the supply of blood to the parts of the body below the heart. However, the force of gravity tends to prevent adequate venous return flow to the heart from these lower regions of the body, with a consequent accumulation and stagnation of blood in these areas. Physically active people have less problems in this respect since the extensive muscular contractions of the veins during exercise ensure adequate return of the blood to the heart.

The stagnation of blood is predominantly a problem with people leading sedentary lives. The accumulation of blood in areas such as the lower limbs and the abdomen, reduces the effective volume of circulating blood in the human organism. This consequently diminishes the nourishment of the body cells, the supply of energy to the muscles and the removal of toxins from the body, which are the main causes of fatigue.

The influence of inverted poses: During inverted poses, the return flow from the legs and abdomen is assisted by the force of gravity, resulting in a greater amount of blood returning to the heart. The heart can only pump as much blood as it receives; in other words, if it receives no blood, it will pump no blood; if it receives five litres per minute, it will pump this same quantity. The increased venous return allows it to pump a greater arterial volume throughout the body.

This greater quantity of blood flows through the lungs and produces an improved exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide. More oxygen is consequently transferred to the body cells and carbon dioxide is more efficiently removed. The increased circulation also ensures a more effective removal of all types of toxins and a more efficient supply of food nourishment throughout the body. Further, any stagnant or sluggish blood in the abdomen, legs and sexual organs is replaced by a good flow of purified blood and so fatigue is eliminated in these areas, particularly the legs.

During inversion of the body, the increased effective blood volume in circulation, together with the assistance of gravity, supplies the upper parts of the body, including the brain, which has already been discussed in section 1(a), with an enriched blood flow and at a slightly higher pressure than normal. This again ensures improved nourishment of the cells and a more efficient removal of toxins.

Inverted poses, if practised regularly and for a reasonable duration, by improving the flushing action of the blood, actively assist the breaking up of sclerotic deposits, which tend to build up on the linings of the blood vessels. These deposits are closely related to the occurrence of coronary thrombosis.

Since the time between heartbeats becomes considerably longer during the performance of inverted poses, the heart is beneficially rested. Though the blood pressure in the upper regions of the body increases during inverted poses, the pressure actually drops below normal after termination of the asana. This further rests the heart and the arteries.

c) The abdominal and pelvic organs

These organs are mainly concerned with digestion, excretion and reproduction.

As already explained in section 1(b) on the heart and circulatory system, stagnant blood tends to accumulate in the regions of the body below the heart, including the abdomen and pelvis. The functions carried out by the abdominal and

pelvic organs are vital for the operation of the whole body and this congestion, which is almost a permanent occurrence in sedentary people, causes extensive repercussions.

The digestive system: The main organs connected with digestion, stomach, intestines and liver, are especially prone to blood congestion, which tends to make them function less efficiently. Nutrition from food is absorbed into the blood stream for distribution to all parts of the body; these organs, therefore, depend extensively on an adequate arterial blood flow for good digestion. Of noteworthy importance is the liver, since all blood circulating in the digestive system must pass through it from the portal vein. A liver which is not congested is absolutely necessary for good digestion of food.

By modifying the blood circulation, inverted poses improve digestion in the following ways:

- i) The relevant organs are decongested and consequently perform their duties more effectively.
- ii) The decongestion of the liver reduces the impediment to the blood flow through the digestive organs and so enhances the digestive process by an increased blood flow. The removal of stagnant blood is also invaluablely assisted by the massage that the liver receives from the diaphragm (see section 2(b)).
- iii) The effective blood volume pumped by the heart is increased, mainly due to the re-circulation of previously stagnant blood, and so the organs receive a still greater blood supply.

Thus inverted poses, besides relieving indigestion, can improve the supply of nourishment to the whole body and so generally improve its functioning and health.

The excretory system: The urinary organs, particularly the kidneys and the large intestines, are also decongested and receive an enhanced blood supply during inverted poses. In this way inefficient activity of the excretory organs, especially weak peristaltic action connected with constipation and urinary problems, can be relieved by regular inversion of the body.

The reproductive system: The sex glands and organs, which are also liable to accumulate stagnant blood and easily lose their functional efficiency, especially as one becomes older; can be decongested and normalized by inverted poses.

It should be remembered that the male and female sex glands, the gonads, which both regulate the reproductive functions and the masculine or feminine body characteristics, are ultimately controlled by the pituitary gland in the brain. This gland is also encouraged to function at its optimum by inverted poses (refer to section 1 (a)). The sexual functions, therefore, benefit in a threefold manner; improving the operation of:

- i) The pituitary gland
- ii) The sex glands
- iii) The sexual organs themselves.

d) The eyes and ears

The effective functioning of the eyes depends on a particularly good supply of oxygen. Thus the inverted poses, by increasing the blood flow to the eyes, also supply them with a supplementary quantity of oxygen. A further improvement in the power of vision is brought about by the increased blood supply to the cerebral centre that controls the operation of the eyes and interprets the information that they receive.

The ears also benefit from inverted poses by the enriched blood circulation.

e) The skin and hair

Complexion problems of adolescence such as acne, and premature wrinkling are partly a result of insufficient nourishment and poor removal of waste material caused by an inadequate blood supply. The inverted poses notably improve the facial nourishment. If they are performed regularly and for a reasonably long duration, they can actively assist in the elimination of minor wrinkles,

the attainment of a clear complexion and the general rejuvenation of the facial skin tissue.

The progressive loss or greying of hair is also caused by a bad blood supply. For this reason, inverted poses help to prevent these occurrences and have even been known to instigate growth of hair on a bald head and restore grey hair to its original colour. This information could easily put many a wig manufacturer out of business!

However, to obtain these spectacular results, it is necessary to practise inverted poses for a long period of time daily, far longer than is practicable for most people. Some people might ask – how is it possible to stop balding if it is a hereditary trait? In fact, many medical scientists now believe that balding is not hereditary. The factor that is hereditary is the tendency of certain people to have bad blood circulation in the scalp. Therefore, improving this inadequate blood circulation by doing inverted poses, removes this tendency and hair will continue to grow normally or start to grow in areas where it has stopped. Sirshasana is the most useful asana for influencing hair growth.

2. THE INFLUENCE OF GRAVITY ON THE POSITION OF CERTAIN ORGANS OF THE BODY

The inversion of the body causes various organs to alter their position relative to each other and to change the normal direction of forces that occur between them. These factors can have beneficial consequences, as will be illustrated in the following text.

a) The lungs

The two lungs occupy nearly all the volume of the thorax, chest cavity, except where it is occupied by the heart and other small structures. With every inhalation, the thorax is enlarged like a pair of bellows, the diaphragm falling and the ribs swinging upwards and outwards. This expansion causes outside air to be sucked through the nose into the

lungs. With each exhalation, a portion of the air in the lungs is squeezed out by the rising diaphragm and the ribs moving downwards and inwards.

During inverted poses, the movement of the diaphragm towards the abdomen is resisted by the weight of the abdominal organs, which act in the direction of the head, instead of the feet as in the normal sitting or standing position. This has the effect of strengthening the diaphragm, which is composed of a thin, but strong muscle sheet, since it is required to move against a greater resistance than normal during the period of inhalation.

This abdominal mass also causes a slight increase of air pressure in the lungs during exhalation, by more effectively and quickly returning the diaphragm towards the lungs. This helps to uncrumple the tiny alveoli, air cells, in the lungs. Since these are the means of interchange between oxygen and carbon dioxide, to and from the pulmonary artery, the body in general benefits by an improved removal of carbon dioxide and a greater intake of oxygen. This is over and above the better exchange obtained by the improved blood circulation as described in section 1 (b).

For further details on the improvements of the respiratory action, refer to the sections on the individual asanas, sirshasana and sarvangasana.

b) The abdominal organs

A normal, necessary and continual process in the body is the massage of the abdominal organs by the motion of the diaphragm. This is one of the body's methods of ensuring their optimum condition and functional efficiency.

As already described in the previous section on the lungs, the upward movement of the diaphragm is opposed by the weight of the abdominal organs during inverted poses. These organs such as the liver, spleen, stomach, kidneys and pancreas also benefit from a massage, which is more powerful than in the normal standing, sitting or lying position. The liver, which is sandwiched between the

other abdominal organs and the diaphragm, and which is extremely compressible, is particularly well massaged. This massage favourably assists in decongesting stagnant blood from the liver; refer to section 1 (c). Since this organ carries out a large number of indispensable functions in the body, its good operational condition can prevent or cure many illnesses.

A problem that affects a large number of people is visceroptosis in which the abdominal organs are displaced downwards from their normal location. Regular practice of inverted poses for a reasonable length of time, such as a few minutes several times daily, can gradually rectify this condition.

General synopsis

Inverted poses produce many other favourable physiological influences on the body which are too numerous to mention in this book. However, reference to the section entitled 'Health Benefits' will indicate the extent to which the human organism is affected by these asanas.

One might suggest that it should be unnecessary or even unnatural for man to invert himself for a period of time. However, it is accepted by many anatomists that man is not yet fully adapted by evolution to the upright standing position and no doubt it will take countless thousands of years for the human body to be perfectly designed for this so-called bipedal position.

In quadrupeds, such as horses and dogs, organs are suspended from a horizontal spine and so compared to man, these animals are generally less susceptible to organic malfunctions. The blood in most of the body of quadrupeds travels horizontally to and from the heart; it does not need to struggle as much against gravity compared to the human body. The inactive, sedentary lives that many people lead make the 'unnatural' practice of inverted poses almost a necessity to counteract the influences of the 'unnatural' modern day life.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCES OF INVERTED POSES

A growing number of medical scientists are currently advocating that the partial cause of nervous maladies and their sublimated manifestations such as fatigue, nervous tremors, weakened memory, depression and melancholia is insufficient nourishment of the brain. All these malfunctions can be eased, if not eliminated in some cases, by regular inversion of the body.

Inverted poses can improve the practitioner's intellectual abilities by enhancing the powers of perception, concentration, comprehension and assimilation. This does not mean these aptitudes are developed beyond that which the individual is capable. Each individual has a maximum aptitude beyond which, in all probability, it is impossible to proceed, but the centres in the brain that provide these abilities are allowed to operate nearer their optimum capacity. In fact, few people, if any, use these aptitudes at anywhere near their highest potential; inverted poses can help the individual to realize their higher capabilities.

Inverted poses can particularly bring about a feeling of tranquillity, a state that many people rarely experience, even during sleep. Stress, anxiety, nervousness and jealousy are generally regarded by both science and yoga as the fundamental cause of many, if not all, mental and physical ailments. The individual, by experiencing tranquillity even for a short period, can move closer to complete equilibrium and the prevention or removal of illnesses, together with a more contented life.

Those people, who are scientifically inclined and who view psychological phenomena in terms of physiological, hormonal and neurological explanations, may find this brief summary a little vague. However, it is currently difficult to give any detailed explanations of the psychological effects of inverted poses in terms of these branches of medical science. It is probable in the near future that an

understanding of these functions will be obtained when scientists accurately chart the unexplored regions of the brain and gain more insight into the operation of the endocrinal glands; not measuring effects, but discovering causes. All we can say at the present time is that inverted poses do profoundly influence mental processes, without being able to give concrete reasons in terms of the various branches of science.

One recent discovery that is especially interesting, however, is the manifestation of the so-called alpha waves, electrical wave patterns, which are emitted from the brain and are related to a state of relaxed and heightened awareness and inner peace. These are profusely emitted from the brain during meditation and during extended and relaxed performances of inverted poses, particularly sirshasana. These alpha waves are believed to be closely associated with the tranquillity that occurs after a reasonable duration of inverted poses. Though these are only measured effects and not causes, they do indicate that notable changes are occurring within the brain during inversion of the body.

HEALTH BENEFITS

The health benefits enumerated in the following text apply to all inverted poses. In some cases, the influence of an individual inverted pose on one particular ailment might be especially beneficial. Under these circumstances a recommendation regarding the most suitable asana to practise for relief or elimination is given with discussion on the ailment. The health benefits, both physiological and psychological, which one can obtain by doing inverted poses, are particularly numerous. The following discussion is not intended to give full details, but indications of these benefits.

It should be remembered that many ailments of the body are but manifestations of a mental problem. In fact, yoga philosophy believes that all illnesses, physical and mental, are caused by the malfunctioning of the mind. Therefore, one should bear in mind that inverted poses act extensively on the brain, and therefore, psychosomatic diseases (all diseases are psychosomatic) can be subtly eased or eliminated in a way that is not clearly understood. For example, many maladies are caused by chronic tension, and since inverted poses bring about a state of tranquillity, this is in itself the first step in removing these types of ailments. The following ailments can be relieved or removed by doing inverted poses:

- Headaches
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Loss and greying of hair: recommended asana is sirsh-asana.
- Bad facial complexion: recommended asanas are sarvang-asana and vipareeta karani mudra.
- Bad hearing
- Nasal and throat ailments: People with mild sinusitis especially benefit since the sinus openings are decongested. People with chronic sinusitis are, however, advised not to practise inverted poses.

- Constipation and dyspepsia: These can be alleviated, particularly if they are caused by a defective blood circulation and/or nervous system.
- Jaundice
- Sluggish or enlarged liver
- High blood pressure: On terminating inverted poses the blood pressure reduces and the individual feels calmness and tranquillity. These poses are, therefore, useful for those people who have a blood pressure that is consistently a little too high, especially if the root cause is chronic stress or anxiety.

Recommended asanas are sirshasana and sarvangasana.

However, people with excessively high or low blood pressure, higher than 150 mm or lower than 100 mm of mercury, are strictly advised not to do inverted poses.

- Glaucoma: The lowering of the blood pressure, as discussed above, has been found useful in the treatment of glaucoma in its early stages. Chronic sufferers, however, are strictly advised not to do inverted poses.
- Varicose veins and haemorrhoids: An extremely common ailment is varicose veins, in which the veins become dilated and the associated valves become incompetent, allowing the blood flow to reverse under the action of gravity. This problem most frequently occurs in the legs, the rectum, haemorrhoids and the lower alimentary canal. This condition is well relieved by inverted poses, the blood fully draining from the veins and the auto-curative properties of the body repairing the offending areas.
- Visceroptosis and prolapse of the sexual organs and anus: By reversing the action of gravity, displaced organs such as the liver, kidneys, spleen, intestines and womb can be returned to their correct position. Prolapse of the vagina, uterus or anus caused by weak muscles can also be rectified. Women who have recently completed childbirth can perform inverted poses to assist the relevant displaced organs to return to their normal position. Numerous doctors now recommend this to post-natal women.

- Menstrual, menopausal and general sexual disorders: Irregular and painful menstruation in women can be corrected by improving the functioning of the endocrinal system which extensively controls this function. Inverted poses, however, should not be practised during the actual period of menstruation. The physically and mentally distressing effects of menopause can be eased by allowing the endocrinal system to smoothly phase out the egg-producing role of the ovaries.
By normalizing the functioning of the endocrinal system, impotence, premature ejaculation, sterility and spermatorrhoea can be discouraged.
- Ageing and lack of vitality: By influencing the thyroid glands, vitality can be increased and the progressive ageing process delayed. Recommended asanas are sarvangasana and halasana.
- Rheumatoid arthritis: Cortisone, one of the principal hormones secreted by the adrenal glands, has a powerful influence on the relief of rheumatoid arthritis. This ailment is caused by an excessive formation of fibres of the protein collagen in the joints; cortisone inhibits this formation. Inverted poses by their action of controlling the endocrinal gland, the pituitary, together with the massage and decongestion that occurs in the abdominal region, including the suprarenal glands, encourages a regular secretion of cortisone and hence can effectively bring relief to sufferers of this widespread ailment.
- Diabetes: Diabetes is almost entirely a disease of the endocrinal system. Though the symptoms are characterized by a lack of insulin produced by the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas, modern thought is tending to believe that the root cause is malfunctioning of the pituitary gland. Whatever the cause of diabetes is, inverted poses act on the entire endocrinal system, including both the pancreas and pituitary glands, and so this disease can be powerfully relieved or eliminated. A further consideration is that many authorities associate this disease

with general anxiety and stress of the individual which is arguably connected with overeating, a further related factor of this disease. Inverted poses, by producing a state of relative tranquillity, aid diabetics in this direction.

- General psychological ailments: The inverted poses regularize the nervous system with the improved blood supply to the brain and can relieve nervous illnesses such as neurasthenia, caused by malfunctioning of certain nervous centres, epilepsy, migraine, insomnia and aerophagia. Tension, depression, frustration, anxiety and anger are all causes of illness and they can be removed and replaced by a feeling of general wellbeing, self-confidence and joy of life.
- Bad respiration: Recommended asanas are sirshasana and sarvangasana. Refer to the individual asana.
- Asthma: Recommended asana is sarvangasana. Refer to sarvangasana respiration section.
- Lordosis and backache: Recommended asana is halasana. Refer to the individual asana.

General synopsis

Inverted poses improve the functioning of the entire body, the brain as well as the glandular, blood and respiratory systems. Since all maladies and diseases are partly or totally caused by faulty bodily functioning, physical and mental, it may be said, without wishing to exaggerate, that inverted poses have a definite and positive contribution, whether limited or extensive, on the removal of bad health and almost all illnesses. Some authorities, speaking from personal experience, even recommend inverted poses for world scourges such as cancer and leprosy. The sceptic might say that diseases are caused by germs and environmental hazards such as polluted atmosphere, inadequate food, etc., which is partly true. Nevertheless, the body's ability to face such hazards and to prevent or reduce the likelihood of the onset of disease depends on its state of health which inverted poses improve.

INVERTED POSES PRACTISED FOR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Those people who want to obtain spiritual benefits should practise inverted poses until they can be done for a long duration with equilibrium and relaxation and without discomfort. This prevents any attention being distracted towards the body throughout the extended period of time necessary to use inverted poses for spiritual purposes.

During the performance of inverted asanas, the usual yogic practices such as breath concentration, ajapa japa, mantra repetition can be done as well as concentration on the chakra associated with the particular asana being used. These chakras are given in the sections on the individual asanas.

It is traditionally believed that inverted poses are especially effective in sublimating sexual energy into spiritual energy. This process is enhanced by applying auto-suggestion, such as concentrating on the idea, 'My sexual energy is being diverted towards spiritual directions'. If practised diligently inverted poses can make the sushumna become more active which in turn stimulates the mooladhara chakra, which can unleash the kundalini and thus give psychic awakening.

Though most unlikely to produce high states of spiritual illumination, inversion of the body can improve meditation and concentration and can make the consciousness more subtle, encouraging it to go into the innermost regions of the chitta. In fact, Swami Sivananda writes that the practice of sirshasana, in particular, can allow one to distinctly hear the anahata sounds, or mystical inner voice. Beginners to meditation or people who have minds that continually drift from one thought to another are well-advised to do inverted poses such as sirshasana and sarvangasana, immediately before starting to meditate. A few minutes allocated in this way are more than worthwhile. The inverted poses should also be preceded by other asanas and pranayama to obtain the best results. If necessary, and if time permits, doing one or more inverted poses prior to other asanas gives maximum relaxation during the practice.

IMPORTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Before attempting any of the asanas described in this book, the following recommendations should be carefully read.

People who should not do inverted poses

People who suffer from the following ailments should not do inverted poses, unless they receive advice from an expert to the contrary:

- High or low blood pressure, higher than 150 mm or lower than 100 mm of mercury.
- Weak heart
- Chronic catarrh; it can be improved in the early stages by inverted poses, but worsened in the later stages.
- Otitis, inflammation of the ear
- Neuralgia of the face
- Chronic glaucoma in the early stages can be alleviated by inverted poses.
- Weak eye capillaries
- Organically defective pituitary or thyroid glands as opposed to functionally defective.
- Arteriosclerosis
- Cerebral thrombosis
- Excessively impure blood, since this can contaminate the brain.
- Chronic asthma or tuberculosis; sufferers of mild asthma or tuberculosis can gain benefits from inverted poses.
- Slipped disc.

Inverted poses should not be done under the following circumstances:

- If one has full bowels
- For at least two or three hours after meals
- If one feels physically tired
- For at least half an hour after hard physical work or strenuous exercises, since the blood will contain excessive impurities associated with the by-products of muscular

activity. These must first of all be eliminated from the blood in the normal way (respiration, urination and perspiration). They can be practised after other asanas since they do not build up toxins in the blood. In fact, if performed correctly they should actively reduce the toxin level in the blood.

- If one obtains palpitations of the heart during inverted poses.
- If one experiences excessive perspiration or becomes very hot during the practice of inverted poses.
- During pregnancy or menstruation.

General advice

- i) No age limit is advocated for doing inverted poses, but elderly people should proceed carefully.
- ii) The practitioner should not worry if excessive nasal mucous accumulates during the practice of inverted poses. This, in fact, is a good indication that rubbish in the body is being effectively removed. If the nose becomes too blocked, do not breathe through the mouth, but terminate the asana for a short while to remove the mucous.
- iii) Asanas are not intended to develop muscles and so the practitioner should not expend large amounts of energy, but perform the asanas with as much relaxation as possible.
- iv) It is not advisable to stand up immediately after completing any of the inverted poses.
- v) The practitioner should practise the recommended counter pose after completing any inverted pose. These are described in the section on each inverted pose.
- vi) During the execution of the asanas try not to let the mind wander. Try to keep the attention on the recommended region of the body during the static phase and on the physical movement during the raising and lowering of the body to and from the final position. Many functions in the body are automatic or involuntary and are controlled by lower regions of the brain. Many functional disorders

are caused by interference of these lower centres by the higher intellectual and cognitive centres. Therefore, to obtain maximum efficacy from the asanas it is important to reduce the thought processes to a minimum, to allow the lower centres to do their duties without hindrance.

- vii) Program of asanas: The choice of asanas to be practised, inverted and others, is entirely up to the practitioner. They should be chosen, however, so that they suit the specific requirements of the individual, whether for physical, mental or spiritual benefits, whilst meeting any time limitations of the asana session.

Those people who have a specific illness to combat, of course, should choose their program to include the most suitable asanas after reading the description of the benefits obtainable from each asana. Those people, who want general maintenance of good health, as well as those with particular ailments, are recommended to formulate their program to include at least one or more asanas from each of the following classifications:

- Inverted asanas
- Forward bending asanas such as paschimottanasana, pada hastasana (These asanas have been fully described in *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas*.)
- Backward bending poses such as bhujangasana, shalabhasana (Backward bending postures are discussed in *Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas*.)
- Spinal twist pose, e.g. ardha matsyendrasana.

The asanas should preferably be practised daily and at the same time of day.

- viii) Respiration: Breathing should be performed in the way described for each asana, to attain maximum benefits from the asanas. Correct breathing during all asanas is most important. Though an asana might be correct as a posture, it loses much of its efficacy if the respiration is not simultaneously carried out in the recommended manner. In fact, we can go as far as to say that an asana performed without breath control is really not an asana!

Asanas

SIRSHASANA (headstand pose)

The Sanskrit word *sirsha* means 'head'. The English name is usually given as the 'headstand pose' though it is also sometimes known as 'vipareeta karani asana', 'topsy-turvy pose' and 'head pose'.

Sirshasana is often referred to as 'the king of all asanas' and some people even go as far as to say that this title has authenticity in ancient texts. This, however, does not appear to be the case, to the best of our knowledge. In fact, none of the known ancient books give any specific reference to this asana. In all probability, this asana, throughout the history of yoga, has been part of esoteric yoga practice and has been passed from guru to disciple by word of mouth and personal tuition.

There is some justification for this tradition, if it is the case, since sirshasana when performed incorrectly or under the wrong circumstances could cause more damage than good. It is only in recent years that this asana has been fully described in books and gained favour with large numbers of people.

The important consideration, however, is that whilst there may be no historically written validity for its title 'king of all asanas', practically this description is justified by the enormous benefits that it can bring to the practitioner, physically, mentally and spiritually. For further discussion

in connection with the absence of reference to sirshasana in ancient texts, refer to the end of the introduction to vipareeta karani mudra.

Benefits of sirshasana differing from other inverted poses

Sirshasana gives all the general benefits of the other inverted poses, but with a particular emphasis on the brain and pituitary gland. The other inverted poses also affect these functions but at a diminished level. Thus, sirshasana and its variations can bring about profound influences on all functions of the body, since they are controlled by the brain, nervous system and endocrinal system.

Scientific test data: Various scientific tests have been made on people whilst performing sirshasana. These tend to indicate that the systolic blood pressure during the contraction phase of the heart becomes much higher than normal. After discontinuing sirshasana, the systolic pressure becomes slightly subnormal, returning to its normal pressure after some time. Tests indicate that after termination of sirshasana there is a notably rapid fall of blood pressure which continues for a reasonably long duration depending on the individual circumstances. The frequency of respiration and hence the intake of air to the lungs is considerably reduced, but the transfer of oxygen to the blood is appreciably increased. These results apply particularly if the practitioner of sirshasana is as relaxed as possible. Tests made on a person who is tense whilst performing sirshasana could possibly give contradictory results.

The spine: One of the greatest hazards of living a sedentary life is the fact that most people are required to sit or stand in one position which is often posturally incorrect for long periods of time. This, together with the constant force of gravity acting on the body, imposes a severe burden on the vertebral column.

When one practises sirshasana, not only is the affect of gravity on the vertebral column reversed, but it assumes a postural position that is structurally correct providing the top

of the head rests on the floor and not the forehead. In other words, no strain is imposed on the spine, other than that for which it is designed.

If one studies a diagram of the human skeleton, it will be immediately obvious that the entire weight of the trunk, head and arms is supported by the vertebral column; this in turn is supported around the articulation of the fifth lumbar vertebra with the sacrum in the region of the hips. Besides bearing this load, this joint has to facilitate forwards, backwards and sideways movements, rendering the disc between the fifth lumbar vertebra and sacrum more vulnerable to strain than all the other vertebral discs. During the practice of sirshasana the weight sustained at this articulation is reversed so that it only bears the weight of the legs and pelvis. This can bring relief to this region. Providing the neck is not excessively weak, the cervical vertebrae can easily support the weight of the body, as long as they are not tensed, but rather allowed to hunch or compress in the way that they are designed to.

Respiration: Modern man in general does not breathe correctly, even though this is one of the most important functions in the body. People tend to engage a much smaller capacity of the lungs than is usable, only exercising the lungs more fully when they physically exert themselves. For maximum functional efficiency, breathing should be deep and slow and sirshasana especially encourages this. As described in the general section, the weight of the abdominal organs acts on the diaphragm and this assists the exhalation. Due to the fixed capacity of the lungs, one can only inhale as much air as has previously been exhaled. Thus, in fact, both exhalation and inhalation are improved. The enhanced exhalation removes a larger amount of residual air and carbon dioxide from the lungs together with toxins and germs which tend to accumulate in this stagnant air. The enhanced inhalation draws in larger quantities of life giving oxygen.

Baldness: As has already been discussed, all inverted poses, including sirshasana, can be useful in preventing

baldness or even stimulating growth where it has stopped. The best recommendation, or perhaps the best proof for those who may be sceptical, is the personal experience of a person who has had notable results.

The following is an extract from a letter written by a Mr M.S.K. Prasad to the *The Times of India* and published in a June, 1972 edition: "I have been losing hair for the last ten years. My frontal scalp has become bald, yet I have never bothered to seek a cure for my baldness as I know nothing can be done for such a problem. For one year I have practised sirshasana, not with the intention of growing more hair, but just to keep fit. To my pleasant surprise I find butts of hair growing on the bald patch. I think this phenomenon of sirshasana helping to grow hair on the bald area may be due to the invigorated blood circulation in the subcutaneous glands during the exercise . . ."

Practice

Before giving details on the actual procedure, it must be pointed out that conflicting opinions exist regarding the most suitable position of the head. Some authorities say that the forehead must bear the weight of the body and others say the top of the head. The only thing that everyone agrees about is that the back of the head should not sustain the force. However, if one wants a comfortable body position during sirshasana, the spine must be straight and this is only possible if the crown of the head rests on the ground. If one performs sirshasana with the forehead resting on the ground, the spine will curve, particularly in the cervical neck region, to balance the weight of the body. This imposes a constant strain on the cervical vertebrae and does not allow maximum relaxation. When the crown of the head rests on the ground, the weight of the body is more easily sustained, since it acts in a vertically straight line through the spine and top of the head. To gain maximum efficacy we, therefore, recommend that sirshasana is performed with the crown of the head on the ground.

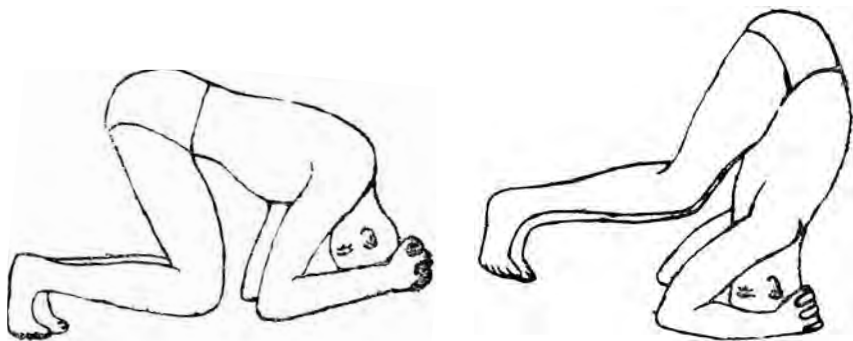
Technique

To attain the final position of sirshasana the individual must progress through the following stages:

Stage 1: Fold a blanket four times and lay it flat on the floor.

Experts often practise without any padding but this is not advised for most people. Assume a kneeling position and interlock the fingers. Place the forearms on the floor in front of the knees so that they form two sides of an equilateral triangle. In other words, the distance between the two elbows should be equal to the distance between the head and elbow of each arm. Lean forward so that the crown of the head rests on the blanket just in front of the clasped hands. Wrap the interlocked fingers around the back of the head with the little fingers resting on the ground. The hands should not support any weight throughout the asana, but should merely prevent the head from tilting backwards by acting as a frame.

Stage 2: Slowly raise the trunk to a vertical position by straightening the legs. The weight of the body is supported on the head, two elbows and the toes. Bring the toes progressively nearer to the face. At a certain stage it becomes impossible to bring the toes nearer the face with the legs straight, without the trunk overbalancing backwards. Most of the weight of the body, by virtue of the position, is now supported by the



Stage 1

Stage 2

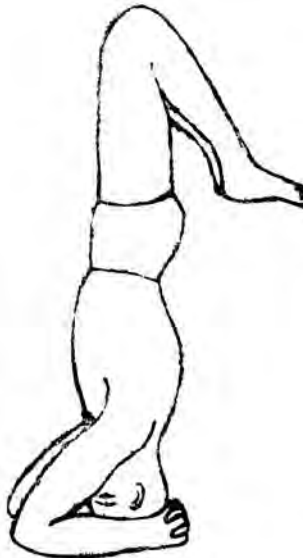
head. Bend the legs and bring the thighs as close to the trunk as possible. Beginners who have particularly stiff muscles can, if they wish, proceed no further than this point for a few days, but slowly accustom their muscles to the position and progressively bring their feet nearer the face.

Practitioners will find the next stage easier if they ensure that the centre of gravity of the body is as far back as possible, without of course moving it so far back that loss of balance results. Some people may find it easier to execute Stage 3 if they separate the knees slightly at the end of Stage 2, bringing them nearer the arm pits; this allows the centre of gravity to be moved further to the rear.

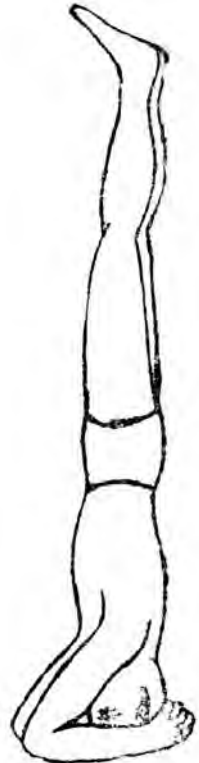
Stage 3: This is the stage which is most difficult for beginners. In the initial execution of this stage, beginners should try to slowly raise their feet an inch or so off the ground and maintain this



Stage 3



Stage 4



Stage 5

position for a short while, experiencing the equilibrium of the body. If the body is stable, the feet can be raised a little higher and again the balance of the body firmly established. If any instability is experienced, the feet should be returned to the ground and the process repeated. This cautiousness is necessary to prevent the beginner toppling backwards.

After some days or weeks, depending on the individual, of regular but not excessive practice, the muscles become adjusted to their extra role and the performance of this stage becomes reasonably easy.

In the final position of this stage, the knees should be as close to the chest as possible and the lower legs should be vertical or as near as is possible. The beginner should not proceed further than this stage until it can be done smoothly without jerking. The legs should not be swung upwards, since this is the quickest way to overbalance backwards. The controlled movement should be performed by contracting the back muscles in the region of the lumbar vertebrae and loins, whilst slowly repositioning the centre of gravity of the body.

Stage 4: After perfecting Stage 3 (not before) the knees are slowly raised so that they point vertically upwards and the thighs assume a position in line with the trunk. The heels should be kept as close as possible to the buttocks, the feet and legs still together. Again care should be taken to ensure that equilibrium is maintained and one does not fall backwards. The movement is accomplished by contracting the back and buttock muscles.

Stage 5: Slowly raise the feet so that the legs are eventually straight and lie in a vertical line with the rest of the body. This is the final position of sirshasana. Allow the body to relax as much as possible to attain the maximum benefits. Breathe slowly and deeply.

The practitioner returns to the ground by exactly the same method required to attain the final position, but in reverse order.

Points to note whilst executing the asana

With constant practice sirshasana is not impossible for most people to do, providing it is executed and maintained correctly. Difficulties can arise if it is performed incorrectly. The following points should be noted:

1. The back of the head, the trunk and the legs should be as perpendicular to the floor as possible in the final position and should not be inclined backwards, forwards or sideways.
2. All muscles should be as relaxed as possible.
3. The majority, if not all, of the weight of the body should be sustained by the top of the head, the arms being used mainly to maintain equilibrium of the body. Some people advise that the weight should be mainly supported by the arms, or equally distributed between the arms and head, but we feel that this is not conducive to maximum relaxation, especially since the weight of the body is easily supported by the spine. Beginners, however, until they sufficiently strengthen their necks and attain a reasonable sense of balance, can extensively use the arms in a supportive role, but over a period of weeks of regular practice the weight should be gradually transferred to the head.
4. The position of the head on the floor should not be moved throughout the entire practice, since any movement of the head tends to cause loss of balance.
5. The knees must be pointed towards the ceiling before raising the feet from the buttocks. This procedure ensures that the body is perpendicular in the final position.
6. The toes should not be pointed upwards in the final position, contrary to prevalent opinion, since this produces contraction of the feet and leg muscles. This impedes free drainage of venous blood towards the heart and so detracts from the benefits obtainable from this asana.

General considerations

Beginners: If they wish, beginners can practise sirshasana near a wall, the back of the head a little more than one foot from the wall, so that if they should overbalance backwards, they will be prevented from falling on their back and injuring themselves. The wall, however, should not be used in any way for executing the asana; it is only for emergencies. When the practitioner becomes proficient he should perform sirshasana away from the wall so that he develops his confidence and removes his dependence on the aid of the wall.

Duration: Conflicting ideas are expressed regarding the duration. Some people say that one should practise for not more than five minutes or not more than ten minutes or not less than one minute. However, the duration of sirshasana really depends on the practitioner's age, physical build, health, the degree of competence in performing the asana and what benefits the individual requires from sirshasana. The duration, therefore, should be chosen with common sense, but preferably with the advice of an expert, if one wants to do it for more than five minutes. As a guide, however, one should terminate the practice at the least sign of fatigue, trembling, head strain or general anxiety in sirshasana.

Beginners must, without exception, gradually increase their duration, from a few seconds in their first stable performance of sirshasana, by steps of five seconds daily. This is important since the blood capillaries in the brain must be slowly adjusted to the extra blood pressure that occurs during this asana. In fact, the whole body must be gradually prepared for longer durations of inversion of the body.

One should eventually aim at a duration of at least a few minutes, since the efficacy of this asana markedly increases with the time in the final position.

Time of day and sequence in an asana program: Sirshasana can be done at any time of the day, except for three hours after food and for at least an hour after vigorous physical exertion.

Conflicting opinions are expressed regarding when sirshasana should be performed in an asana session. Some people say it should be done before other asanas and others say it should be done after other asanas. Again the best time depends on what the individual requires from sirshasana and whether or not he is proficient in its practice. Generally, beginners should execute the asana at the end of the session, when their muscles have become more relaxed and flexible and their blood more purified. Some beginners may find that they use excessive muscular energy during an asana session, by not relaxing physically and mentally. This, of course, should not be the case. There is justification for these people, providing their blood is not too impure, to do sirshasana at the beginning of the session, so that they can sufficiently relax to perform the asana session in the correct, relaxed manner.

Spiritual aspirants can do sirshasana before other asanas for the same reason, to obtain the best state of mind and body, whilst performing other asanas; or they can do sirshasana after the other asanas if meditation is to follow immediately.

Loss of balance: Whether practitioners perform against a wall or not, other obstructions such as chairs or tables should not be in the vicinity; these could cause injury by impeding free fall to the ground. During a fall, the body should be relaxed. In the forward direction the knees should be folded towards the chest as much as possible and the impact on the floor sustained by the feet. In the backward direction, arch the back in a concave sense as much as possible, again ensuring that only the feet sustain any impact on the floor. No part of the back should hit the floor before the feet.

Counterpose: Contradictory information is expressed on the most suitable counterpose. Some advise tadasana, standing on tiptoe with arms stretched above the head, others shavasana and others say merely massage the whole body in the standing position. We recommend the following procedure: on termination of sirshasana, maintain the

kneeling position with the head on the floor for at least thirty seconds, and then do *tadasana* for about a minute. This procedure ensures that the functions of the body, particularly the blood circulation, are gradually readjusted to their normal operating conditions.

Concentration: *Physical:* If one wants physical benefits in a particular part of the body, then concentration should be directed to that region. For example, if one wants to cure varicose veins in the legs, one should concentrate on the legs and imagine effective drainage of blood from the veins and the relaxation of the veins. One can also concentrate on the brain which will bring about physical benefits.

Mental: If one wants mental benefits, then one should concentrate on the brain and visualize the greater flow of blood whilst applying auto-suggestion, believing wholeheartedly that one will obtain the required mental benefits.

Spiritual: Many possibilities exist, though the most usual is to concentrate on the *sahasrara* chakra, sometimes associated with the pituitary gland in the brain, the thousand petalled lotus, where it is said Lord Shiva awaits the ascent of the *kundalini* or psychic consciousness.

Important recommendations

These are as given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

Sirshasana should not be practised by the people listed in the general section, as well as by people who have weak necks.

Dynamic exercises based on *sirshasana*

When the individual becomes proficient in doing *sirshasana* the following dynamic exercises may be practised to make the muscles of the body more supple and to generally tone the abdominal organs.

Technique

Assume sirshasana.

Whilst exhaling, lower one leg downwards and forwards to the horizontal or as near as possible, whilst keeping the other leg vertical. Both legs should remain straight. Maintain the pose for a few seconds and then return to the original position whilst inhaling.

Repeat the movement but lowering the other leg.

Simultaneously lower both legs in the same manner.

Lower one leg forwards and downwards and the other leg backwards and downwards in the same way.

Repeat Stage 4 but reverse the legs.

Repeat Stage 4 and 5 but twist the body at first right and then left as much as is comfortably possible. Respiration should be normal.

Whilst in sirshasana, exhale and contract the abdominal muscles. After a comfortable period of time, relax and inhale. Repeat a few times.

All the exercises should be executed with control and needless to say without losing balance. The synchronization of the breath with movement should not be neglected, since this is as important as the physical exercises.

VARIATIONS OF SIRSHASANA

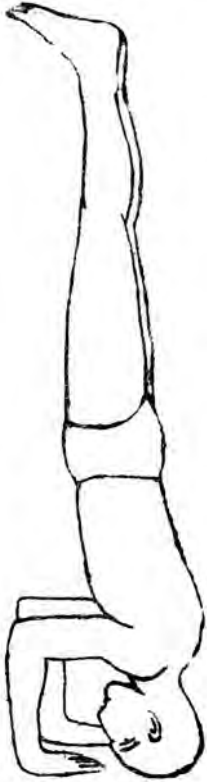
There are numerous variations of sirshasana; only the important ones will be given in this book.

1. Salamba Sirshasana (supported headstand pose)

Salamba is a Sanskrit word meaning 'with support'. Thus the English translation of this asana may be given as the 'supported headstand pose'.

Benefits

The benefits are the same as for sirshasana.



Technique

The method of execution is exactly the same as for sirshasana except the palms are placed downwards on the floor on each side of the body instead of behind the head. The distance between the two palms should be approximately the same as the distance between each palm and the position of the head on the ground. The practitioner should, however, experiment until he finds the arrangement that is most suitable. Though the movement from the starting position to the final position is exactly the same as for sirshasana, this asana is considerably easier to perform. Thus beginners who make no headway with sirshasana can do salamba sirshasana initially, to make the relevant muscles supple and also to develop a good sense of balance.

As in sirshasana, the crown of the head should rest on the floor, and in the final position the body should be as straight as possible. Salamba sirshasana, though easier to perform, is not as highly

regarded as sirshasana, since it is difficult to maintain the final position for an extended length of time and with maximum possible relaxation.

General considerations and important recommendations

These are the same as for sirshasana.

2. Niralamba Sirshasana (unsupported headstand pose)

Niralamba is a Sanskrit word meaning 'without support'. The asana is thus translated as the 'unsupported headstand pose'. This asana is sometimes known as *mukta hasta sirshasana*, 'free-hand headstand pose'.

It is also known as ‘triangular headstand pose’. This is one of the most difficult forms of sirshasana to do correctly. If one becomes proficient in the practice of this asana, one may justly claim to have mastered headstand techniques. It is especially useful in developing a good sense of balance.

Benefits

The benefits are essentially the same as for sirshasana, except that the cerebellum, the region of the brain that coordinates fine movements and controls the posture of the body, is especially developed, together with the power of concentration. The neck muscles are also well exercised and strengthened.

Technique

Stage 1: Kneel and place the crown of the head on a blanket.

Straighten the arms in front of the chest and place the back of the hands flat on the floor. Beginners, if they wish, may clench their fists and rest the back of the fists on the floor; this will give more leverage during the elevation of the legs. The distance between the hands should be about the same as the width of the shoulders, though beginners, if necessary, can keep their hands further apart.

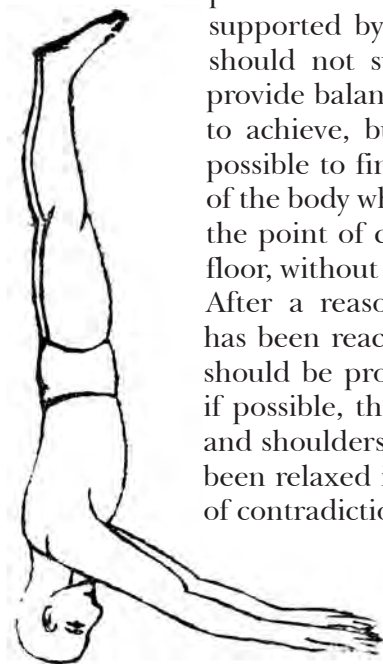
Stage 2: Straighten the legs, allowing the weight of the body to be sustained by the hands and head, together with the feet. Progressively move the feet towards the face, keeping the legs straight, until the trunk is vertical. Applying pressure between the back of the hands and the ground, slowly bend the legs and raise the feet, bringing the knees to the chest. Many adepts do not bend their legs at this stage, but keeping them straight, raise them directly to the vertical position. This, however, is a technique that can be adopted when one has mastered the method outlined here and when one has sufficiently developed the neck muscles.

Stage 3: Slowly raise the knees, whilst continually ensuring equilibrium, until they point directly upwards. Maintain this position for a few seconds, with total awareness of the balance of the body and then gradually straighten the legs until the feet point upwards. Breathe calmly.

The asana can be maintained for longer periods if all the weight of the body is supported by the head. Ideally the hands should not support any weight, but only provide balance. This, of course, is difficult to achieve, but by continual practice it is possible to find the one particular position of the body which transmits all the weight to the point of contact between the head and floor, without loss of balance.

After a reasonable degree of proficiency has been reached, the muscles of the body should be progressively relaxed, including, if possible, the muscles of the hands, arms and shoulders. When all these muscles have been relaxed it can be claimed without fear of contradiction, that the head supports the entire weight of the body.

The practitioner returns to the ground using the same procedure as elevating the body, but in reverse order.



Stage 3

General considerations and important recommendations

These are the same as for sirshasana.

This is predominantly a balancing pose and all practitioners are advised to do it in front of a wall and not in the vicinity of furniture.

People who want to maintain an inverted pose for more than a minute, and particularly spiritual aspirants, are not advised to practise niralamba sirshasana, but to do sirshasana.

3. Oordhwa Padmasana (raised lotus pose)

In Sanskrit *urdhva* means 'raised' and *padma* means 'lotus'. Therefore, the usual English name of this asana is given as the 'raised lotus pose'. Other names of this asana include 'bound headstand' and 'inverted lotus pose'.

Benefits

This asana gives the same benefits as sirshasana except the drainage of blood from the legs is impeded and so a smaller increase of effective blood circulation is obtained. This asana, however, stretches particularly the regions of the ribs, back and pelvis, allowing full expansion of the chest and a good blood flow to the pelvic organs.

It is consequently especially useful for rectifying sexual disorders, by simultaneously improving the functioning of the gonads, sexual glands and sexual organs.

Technique

To do this asana the practitioner must be able to do padmasana, lotus pose, without difficulty. The technique is especially easy to describe. Perform sirshasana and then fold the legs into padmasana.



General considerations and important recommendations

These are as given for sirshasana.

Though this is a more stable pose than sirshasana, great care must be taken to ensure that one does not overbalance, since the feet are now no longer available to prevent vulnerable parts of the body hitting the floor with force. For this reason, all people are advised to practise near a wall, which will at least prevent backward falls. Any slight tendency to fall forwards can usually be counteracted by an opposing upward force from the elbows and/or a force applied from the muscles of the chest.

BHUMI PADA MASTAKASANA (half headstand pose)

The Sanskrit words *bhumi* means 'ground', *pada* means 'feet' and *mastaka* means 'head'. The usual English translation is given as the 'head foot pose'. It is also known as *grivasana*, the 'neck pose'.

This is a semi-inverted pose which is an excellent preparatory pose for sirshasana, particularly for beginners who have a weak neck and who need to develop their sense of balance.

Benefits

This asana gives most of the benefits of full inverted poses, notably sirshasana, but at a considerably reduced level. It differs from most of the inverted poses in that the blood in the lower parts of the body does not drain towards the heart. Consequently, there is less blood circulation, together with all the accruing benefits and it does not relieve or eliminate varicose veins, haemorrhoids, and so on.

However, it does strengthen the neck and improve the sense of balance, both prime requirements for performing sirshasana and its variations.

Technique

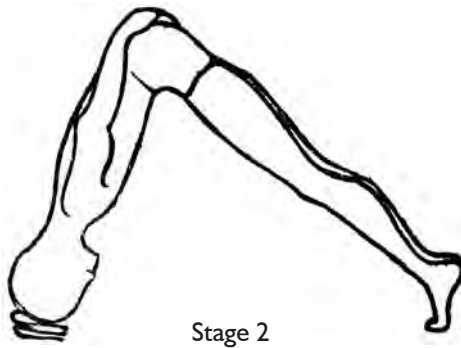
Stage I: Place a folded blanket, about four folds, or a cushion on the floor. Assume a kneeling position with feet together and rest the head midway between the crown and forehead on the blanket. Position the hands on each side of the body, the forearms vertical. Using the arms to provide balance, slowly raise the trunk and legs so that the weight of the body is supported by the toes and head. The body should be raised by straightening the legs. The trunk should be kept as straight as possible the body being bent at the hips. The distance between the toes and head may be adjusted, the actual distance being the choice of the practitioner.

However, as a general guide, the following should be noted:

- The nearer the toes are to the head, the more vertical the trunk becomes; in this case the effects of the asana become more in line with inverted poses, but the neck muscles are used less and so not notably strengthened.
- The further the toes are away from the head the more horizontal becomes the trunk; in this position the effects become less in line with the effects of inverted poses, but the neck muscles are powerfully exercised and strengthened.

Thus the practitioner must decide what benefits he wants to obtain from the asana; though in doing each type consecutively, he would gain most advantages.

Stage 2: When the practitioner feels that the body is in equilibrium, the arms should be straightened and the hands placed behind the lower back, one hand holding the wrist of the other hand. Maintain for a comfortable length of time and then return to the starting position.



Stage 2

General considerations and important recommendations

Respiration: Respiration should be normal if the pose is to be maintained for a reasonable length of time. This asana can also be executed dynamically, a repetitive execution of the asana, in which case the respiration should be as follows: exhale in the starting position, perform the asana

whilst holding the breath and inhale on returning to the starting position.

Balance: To attain balance easily, beginners can, if they wish, keep their feet apart. As they become more accustomed to the asana over a period of days or weeks, they should progressively bring their feet together so that they develop their sense of balance to the full.

Concentration: Concentration should be the same as for sirshasana. However, if the prime motive is to strengthen the neck, concentration should be directed to this region.

VRISCHIKASANA (scorpion pose)

The word *vrischika* is the Sanskrit word for 'scorpion' and so the English translation is the 'scorpion pose'. This asana is so called, because, in its final position, it resembles a scorpion with its tail arched above its back in preparation to strike its victim.

This is quite a difficult asana to execute, requiring a highly developed sense of balance. However, in some respects, it is even more efficacious than sirshasana, since it duplicates all the benefits of sirshasana, together with further notable benefits. Its main drawback is that it is not easy to maintain for more than a short duration, so that the benefits that it could give do not reach fruition.

Due to its reasonable degree of difficulty, only people with supple spines, a good sense of balance and who can do sirshasana without the slightest problem should perform or attempt to learn this asana.

Benefits

All the benefits of sirshasana are obtained from this asana. Superimposed on these effects, however, are the benefits obtained from backward bending asanas, such as bhujangasana and dhanurasana.

The vertebral column and associated nerves: In vrischik-asana the weight of the body is supported by the upper

arms, not by the neck as in sirshasana. Consequently, the cervical vertebrae are completely relaxed. This disengages the individual vertebrae in this region from each other and releases all compression on the discs between adjoining vertebrae. Consequently, any pressure on the cranial nerves which emerge from the spinal cord in the spaces between the cervical vertebrae is released. This produces a beneficial relaxation of these nerves, together with an unimpeded flow of blood to the brain, which is even superior to that obtained during sirshasana.

The general curvature of the whole spine produces suppleness and aids the drainage of blood in the back, which is normally rather sluggish. All the pairs of spinal nerves which exit from the spinal cord through the spaces between adjacent vertebrae together with the two sympathetic nerve chains which run beside the vertebral column, embedded in the muscles surrounding the spine, receive a favourable stimulation during vrischikasana. Since these nerves have a widespread influence on the functioning of the body, the results of this stimulation can be a general, yet profound, improvement in the health of the body.

The abdomen: The influences on the abdomen are essentially the same as all the inverted poses, but the accentuated curvature of the body in the region of the abdomen increases the internal pressure. This, in conjunction with the diaphragmatic motion (refer to the section entitled 'Physiological Explanation of the General Effects of all Inverted Poses') accentuates the massage imparted to the abdominal organs. Though all the inverted poses encourage the drainage of stagnant blood from the abdominal organs, the increased intra-abdominal pressure obtained in vrischikasana further improves this expulsion of blood.

The general effect is an increase in the functional efficiency of the abdominal organs; removal of constipation, indigestion and other abdominal disorders. The normally inaccessible kidneys and suprarenal glands are also favourably compressed by the curvature of the back and

stimulated by the motion of the diaphragm. This provokes improvement in their functioning, enhancing the process of purification of blood and elimination of urine by the kidneys. Furthermore, the action of the suprarenal glands, which notably influence the emotional state of an individual by the secretion of the hormone adrenalin, are normalized.

The cerebellum: As execution of this asana requires a good sense of balance, it develops the cerebellum, the organ in the brain which coordinates and controls the voluntary movements and postures of the body. This development is accompanied by an enriched blood flow to this centre due to the inverted position. Both of these effects simultaneously improve the functioning of the cerebellum.

Technique

The successful accomplishment of this asana requires a good sense of balance and a relaxed body. If performed correctly little muscular strength is necessary; if muscular strength is used for its execution or maintenance, this is a sure indication that it is being done incorrectly.

People who are not proficient in the execution of this asana are advised to practise near a wall, the head about two thirds of an arm's length from the wall, though this can be adjusted to suit the individual requirements.

Stage 1: Place a folded blanket on the floor, kneel, interlock the fingers and place the forearms on the floor so that they are as parallel as possible with each other, not forming two sides of a triangle as in sirshasana. Lean forward and place the forehead, not the crown of the head as in sirshasana, on top of the blanket with the hands supporting the back of the head.

Stage 2: Elevate the body to the vertical position in exactly the same manner as for sirshasana (refer to Stages 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the section on the technique of performing sirshasana).

Since the forehead sustains the weight of the body, the spine will be curved in the final position. Relax

the muscles of the body as much as possible. Breathe normally.

Stage 3: Slowly bend the legs backwards, whilst maintaining complete relaxation in the legs and whilst progressively relaxing the back muscles. When the feet can descend no further and the back reaches its maximum curvature, maintain the position statically for half a minute or so. Beginners are advised to proceed no further than this stage until they become completely accustomed to the position over a period of a few days or weeks.

During this time their back should become more supple and so attain a greater curvature; and they should become more proficient at relaxing their leg and back muscles.

Stage 4: Slowly disengage the fingers from each other at the back of the head and place the palms flat on the ground, keeping the forearms parallel. Ensure that the body is completely balanced. Then gradually tilt the head backwards, whilst rotating the upper arms to the vertical position, so that the elbows eventually lie directly below the shoulders. Throughout this motion the centre of gravity of the body is slowly moved backwards, until finally it lies in the same plane as the two elbows. Initially, beginners can perform this last and most difficult stage by pushing their feet against the wall, and over a period of days and weeks, depending less and less on the assistance of the wall.

When perfectly executed, the maintenance of the asana depends entirely on perfect equilibrium of the body on the elbows. All of the weight of the body is being supported by the



Stage 4

upper arms and elbows, no weight or pressure is being sustained by the forearms. All the muscles of the body should be relaxed, except the shoulder muscles.

Respiration, though impeded by the curvature of the trunk, should be as normal and as rhythmic as possible. The practitioner returns to the starting position by repeating the listed stages, but in the reversed order. The adept, however, providing the asana is not done near a wall, can merely let his feet drop to the ground behind the head. This latter method, however, is not to be practised unless the practitioner is sufficiently proficient, so as not to incur any injury.

General considerations

All the points listed under sirshasana generally apply to this asana, though *shashankasana*, the 'hare pose', is the most suitable counter pose, since it effectively releases any tension in the back.

Duration: The problem of the suitable duration does not cause any controversy with this asana, since it is very difficult to perform for more than a minute or so.

Concentration: It is exceedingly difficult to concentrate on anything but maintaining balance and so all concentration should be in this direction.

Important recommendations

These are given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

SARVANGASANA (shoulder stand pose)

The meaning of the Sanskrit word *sarva* is 'entire', 'all' or 'whole' and *anga* means 'body', 'limbs', 'parts' or 'organs'. Thus *sarvanga* may be translated as 'the whole body' or 'all the limbs'. Sarvangasana is so called because it influences the entire body and its functions. The most common English name of this asana, 'shoulder stand pose', is not a direct translation.

It is also sometimes known by the following names: *salamba sarvangasana*, 'supported shoulder stand pose', 'pan-physical pose', 'candle pose' or 'complete pose'.

The Sanskrit name sarvangasana describes this asana most aptly and sums up concisely the enormous influence this asana has on the functions of the entire human organism. Sarvangasana gives essentially the same effects as sirshasana and is considerably easier to perform. Thus people who have difficulty in executing sirshasana are advised to do sarvangasana. However, whilst the influences of both of these asanas on the body are basically similar, they differ specifically in the principal direction of their influence: sirshasana acts particularly on the brain, including the pituitary gland, and influences the thyroid to a lesser degree; sarvangasana, on the other hand, acts especially on the thyroid and affects the brain and pituitary gland to a lesser degree. Thus, in fact, they supplement each other and for maximum benefits it is preferable to perform both of these asanas, one after the other.

Benefits

Sarvangasana produces all the general effects enumerated for other inverted poses, but with a distinctive influence on the thyroid and parathyroid endocrinal glands. Though all the inverted poses affect these glands, they do so to a markedly lesser extent than sarvangasana. It is the influence on the thyroid and parathyroid glands that bring about changes in the whole body. Therefore, to fully appreciate the benefits of

this asana, it is worthwhile giving a brief description of these glands and their functions.

Thyroid gland

The thyroid consists of two lobes, which lie on either side of the wind-pipe in the neck, each about 4 cm long on average and weighing about 10 grams. These two lobes are joined by a narrow band of gland tissue, which crosses in front of the windpipe. The two hormones that it secretes, thyroxin and tri-iodothyroxin, both profoundly influence physical and mental development, in fact, the entire metabolism of the psycho-physiological body.

Each of the two lobes is generously supplied with blood by two arteries and contains a particularly large number of blood vessels in relation to their size. Thus an unimpaired and abundant supply of blood is of the utmost importance for their correct functioning.

The importance of the thyroid has been indicated by experiments carried out by scientists, who on removing it from young animals, have found that they fail to develop both sexually and mentally. In adults, an underactive thyroid, inadequate secretion of hormones or hypothyroidism, results in a slowing down of all the bodily functions. The individual becomes fat, constipated, lethargic, apathetic, slow, indolent and the intellectual faculties are impaired. In children an underactive thyroid causes cretinism, deformity, dwarfism and arrested mental development. An overactive thyroid, an excessive secretion of hormones or hyperthyroidism speeds up the bodily functions, producing loss of weight, diarrhoea, an increased circulatory and respiratory rate, extreme nervousness and excitability and sometimes psychotic manifestations. An overactive thyroid in children produces gigantism.

A multitudinous collection of further ailments can occur due to the faulty operation of the thyroid, too numerous, however, to mention in this brief resume.

Parathyroid gland

The parathyroid gland consists of four oval shaped masses of cells, each weighing about 30 milligrams, situated beside the thyroid gland. These have a blood supply independent of the thyroid and secrete a hormone in the blood called parathyroxin, also called parahormone. This hormone controls the calcium level in the blood and so influences growth and regeneration of bones.

Influence of sarvangasana on the thyroid and parathyroid glands

The vital importance of these glands, together with the necessity of their optimum functioning, should now be apparent to the reader. Due to sedentary life and a general lack of exercise, the thyroid and parathyroid glands can easily become sluggish or generally function inefficiently. Sarvangasana is the ideal asana for those people who want to obtain normal operation of these glands.

Thyroid gland: Two main pairs of blood vessels provide the major arterial blood supply to the thyroid: the superior thyroid arteries arising in the external carotids, two blood vessels which lie on each side of the neck, and the inferior thyroid arteries which originate from the subclavian arteries, the two main blood vessels which supply each arm. During sarvangasana, the neck is bent at a right angle to the trunk and the chest, specifically the sternum or the jugular notch is pressed firmly against the chin. This position produces a profound curvature of the external carotids, which together with the general compression in the region of the neck, tends to restrict the blood flow in this region, diverting a more abundant flow to the thyroid gland. This diverted flow of blood is supplemented to a greater or lesser degree by the action of gravity on the flow in the superior carotid arteries and the subclavian arteries. This richer blood flow provides the thyroid with extra nourishment and normalizes its functions.

Parathyroid gland: The parathyroids do not receive a substantial flow of blood, compared to the thyroid, but they

also benefit with an increased blood flow in the same way and for the same reasons.

General benefits

Regular practice of sarvangasana, by its favourable influence principally on the thyroid, ensures health of the entire body and can rejuvenate ageing bodies. Since the thyroid controls the metabolism of the whole body, sarvangasana can help to maintain the correct body weight, assuming, of course, that the practitioner does not eat excessive amounts of food.

The asana assists in maintaining the nervous system in its optimum working condition, helps to protect the body from infection and beneficially improves the functions of the whole organism: circulatory, alimentary, genito-urinary systems, including the other subsidiary endocrinal glands, gonads, suprarenal, which it extensively influences.

Adults are advised to practise this asana to regain or maintain their youthfulness and vitality. A few authorities advise children not to do sarvangasana for fear that it may alter their normal growth pattern. However, this caution is completely unfounded, since this asana does not alter the functions normally carried out by the thyroid, it merely improves its operational efficiency and rectifies any malfunction. In fact, sarvangasana is specifically recommended for children to make sure that their thyroids operate correctly so that their growth is normal. Bear in mind also that children throw themselves about during play and probably invert themselves a number of times daily. They are, therefore, unknowingly stimulating the blood flow to the thyroid and, of course, with no ill effects.

It should be noted that the hormones secreted by the thyroid are partially controlled by the pituitary gland. During sarvangasana the pituitary gland also receives an enriched blood supply, though not as much as in sirshasana, mainly due to the impeded flow at the neck. Since both these controllers are regulated simultaneously, the functions that they control by the secretion of various hormones benefit fully.

Sarvangasana's action on the parathyroid ensures correct bone growth and regeneration and can prevent premature ossification, hardening of the bones.

Respiration: The position of the body during sarvangasana dictates that the practitioner must breathe abdominally; the pressure between the chest and the chin completely prevents the movement of the ribs towards the head (clavicular respiration) and imposes a severe limitation on expansion of the ribs outwards (intercostals respiration). Only the movement of the diaphragm is unimpeded apart from the weight of the abdominal organs, and the practitioner is forced to do abdominal breathing.

This asana is particularly useful for people who suffer from asthma, since it obliges them to breathe diaphragmatically, whereas normally they would tend to breathe with an accentuated clavicular respiration.

As discussed in the section 'The Influence of Gravity on the Position of Certain Organs', in inverted poses the weight of the abdominal organs improves respiration; this is also true with sarvangasana.

Certain nerves which innervate the respiratory system, are also stimulated, giving further improvement in the respiratory function.

Neck, face and upper chest: The pressure of the chest against the chin during sarvangasana specifically directs an enriched blood supply to other organs in the neck region, as well as the thyroid and parathyroid glands. These include the tonsils, important lymph nodes, which produce antibodies for the protection of the organism from infection, the ears, the lungs and the thymus. All these organs function more efficiently because of the extra nourishment. The thymus, which is situated in the upper part of the chest and is sometimes classified as an endocrinal gland, plays an important part in the normal physical and mental growth of children. Sarvangasana is recommended for children to ensure efficient operation of this gland and hence normal development. The thymus also has an immunological role in

both children and adults and so its correct functioning ensures the auto-therapeutic capabilities of the body are fully active.

The salivary glands which surround the mouth are also influenced by this asana. Since the saliva, containing ptyalin, is essential for good digestion of food, the digestive functions of the body are enhanced.

An enriched blood supply is directed to the face and forehead which improves the general complexion and removes minor wrinkles, caused partly by under-nourishment of the facial tissue.

Sarvangasana is especially useful for eliminating ailments of the throat, nasal catarrh, tonsillitis and common colds.

The spine: Many asanas bend the spine in the region of the back in a forward direction. Sarvangasana is one of the few asanas, including halasana, which bends the vertebral column in the region of the neck in a forward direction. Thus this asana renders this most important region supple and improves the articulation between the individual cervical vertebrae.

Nervous system: Sarvangasana influences the brain, though not as much as sirshasana. However, the enriched blood supply to the region of the neck has a particularly good stimulating and regulating action on the cervical spinal cord, which is encased by the vertebral column, and the eight cervical spinal nerves which branch out from the spinal cord in this region. These nerves notably innervate the muscles of the neck, face, the upper trunk and arms, through a group called the phrenic nerves, which originate from the neck. They innervate the diaphragm and so have an important influence on respiration. Sarvangasana helps to ensure smooth nervous activity of these parts of the body.

Also arising in the region of the neck are various nerves forming part of the parasympathetic nervous system. This is part of the autonomic nervous system and partly controls the functioning of the internal organs connected with blood circulation and digestion. Sarvangasana stimulates these nerves and so improves the associated functions.

Blood pressure and stress: In the neck are a collection of receptors called carotid sinuses. These are sensitive to changes in blood pressure; when the pressure increases these receptors cause the heart beat to slow down and the blood pressure to reduce.

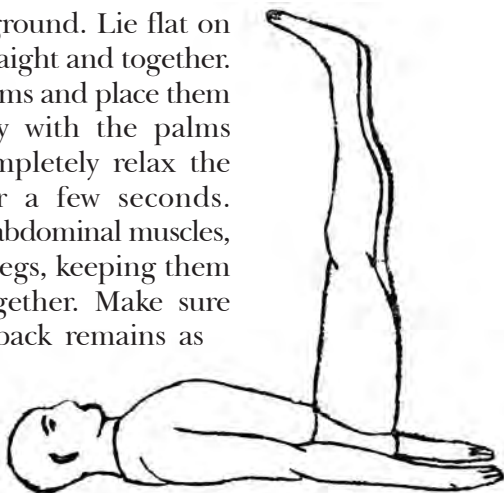
During sarvangasana these sinuses are compressed by the position of the neck and thus keep the heart beat and blood pressure at a reasonable level throughout the asana. This, in fact, is an advantage of this asana over sirshasana, where the blood pressure rises during the execution, though it does drop after termination.

For this reason sarvangasana is the recommended asana for those people who have higher than normal blood pressure.

It should also be pointed out that compression of the carotid sinuses induces tranquillity of the brain by means of sinus nerves which connect to the brain. In this way sarvangasana is particularly useful for removing anxiety and stress.

Technique

Stage I: Put a once or twice-folded blanket on the ground. Lie flat on the back, legs straight and together. Straighten the arms and place them beside the body with the palms downwards. Completely relax the whole body for a few seconds. Contracting the abdominal muscles, slowly raise the legs, keeping them straight and together. Make sure that the entire back remains as flat as possible on the ground, together with the back of the head.

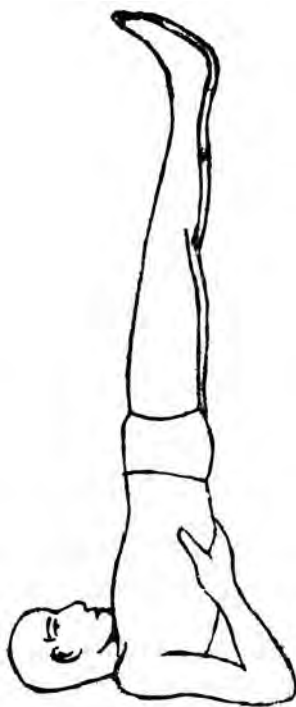


Stage I

The arms and hands should preferably not assist in the raising of the legs by applying pressure on the floor, but should be limp. This ensures that the abdominal muscles do the maximum amount of work and gradually become stronger. During the elevation of the legs, the muscles of the neck and legs should also be as relaxed as possible. Respiration should be slow and rhythmical. When the legs become perpendicular to the ground, maintain a static position for a few seconds.

Stage 2: At this stage the hands and arms begin to take an active part in the execution of the asana. By pressing the hands and arms against the floor and contracting the abdominal muscles, slowly (do not jerk or fling) elevate the legs and feet further, by raising the lower back off the ground. Keeping the feet together, elevate them as high as possible, until they are vertically above the face and the entire back is off the ground and as vertical as possible. At this point the body is supported by the two arms and hands, the nape of the neck, back of the head and the shoulders.

The chest, the jugular notch or sternum, should be pushed against the chin using the arms to apply pressure if necessary. Transfer the pressure exerted by the arms to the upper arms, mainly the elbows, then fold the forearms upwards, placing the hands on the rear and side of the back behind the chest. This is the final position; the body should be supported as much as possible by the



Stage 2

shoulders, nape of the neck and back of the head. The bent arms should be used mainly to provide stability and to support the body if there is a tendency to overbalance. Breathing should be normal and rhythmical and the body as relaxed as possible.

Some authorities say that the feet should be pointed. However, this diminishes the efficacy of the asana, since pointing the feet necessitates contraction of the leg muscles, which impedes the free drainage of blood from the veins of the legs. The feet should, therefore, not be pointed but relaxed together with the legs. Though the legs should be as vertical as possible, they should not be held vertical if excessive muscular contraction is required. In fact, for many people the chest can be held more firmly against the chin, which is a most important aspect of this asana, by slightly inclining the straight legs over the top of the head.

The neck should not be strained. Therefore, if beginners experience difficulty in sufficiently flexing the neck to allow the chest to press against the chin, they should not use force, but slowly loosen the cervical spine and muscles over a period of days or weeks. Often, however, the inability to press the sternum against the chin is caused by the trunk not being as vertical as it should be. In this case, the hands should be placed nearer the shoulders and the arms used to elevate the trunk to a more vertical position. As the body becomes accustomed to the position of sarvangasana, the arms and hands should play an increasingly reduced role.

Throughout the performance of the asana, including the ascending and descending movements, the back of the head should never leave the ground.

The return to the starting position is executed in the same manner as elevating the body, but in the reversed order. It should be a controlled and slow movement without any parts of the body 'hitting' the ground with force.

Alternative method (for beginners)

People who experience difficulty in keeping their legs straight while elevating them to a perpendicular position and also while raising the trunk and legs to the final position, should bend their legs in the starting position. The amount that the legs are bent is entirely the choice of the practitioner; by experience he should find the most suitable starting position. The soles of the feet should be placed flat on the ground. The trunk should then be elevated to the vertical position, by contracting the abdominal muscles, and if necessary with the assistance of the hands and arms pushing the lower back. The legs should not be straightened during the movement. Maintain this position for a short while, with the hands placed firmly on the side and back of the ribs, the arms bent with the elbows preventing the body rolling backwards. Then slowly straighten the legs to attain the final position.

Breathing should be normal. The return to the ground is repeated in reverse order.

General considerations

Beginners: Beginners should practise near a wall, the top of the head pointing towards the wall, so that they can prevent any tendency of the legs to overbalance the body over the head and cause any straining of the neck muscles and cervical vertebrae.

Duration: Conflicting opinions are expressed on this subject, but, as with sirshasana, the decision really lies with the practitioner. In fact, the practitioner's body should indicate if the suitable duration for the individual has been exceeded by discomfort or slight tiredness. At this stage the asana should be immediately terminated. Beginners, of course, should slowly increase their duration by a few seconds daily. A good duration to achieve physiological benefits is between three to five minutes. If a person requires specific removal of an ailment this time can

be extended. Spiritual aspirants should practise the asana for prolonged periods, preferably under the guidance of an expert.

Time of practice during the day: This is the same as for sirshasana (refer to section on sirshasana for details). Smooth execution of sarvangasana requires a flexible neck and so this asana will in general be performed more easily in the late afternoon or evening, when the body attains its maximum suppleness. However, if it is done in the morning, it should be preceded by exercises which loosen up the neck.

A good daily routine would be to do sarvangasana for a few minutes both in the early morning and late afternoon or evening, if possible consecutively with sirshasana.

Counterposes: Any asana which bends the neck in the opposite direction to that which it assumes during sarvangasana will serve as a counterpose. The best asanas to do are matsyasana, ushtrasana, chakrasana or supta vajrasana, which should be performed for about a minute, or sufficiently long to remove the tensions in the neck. Many people may find these counterposes difficult and so an alternative is to lie on the floor and then raise the trunk so that it is supported on the elbows. Bend the head back as far as is comfortably possible for about a minute. However, the standard counterposes are to be preferred and should be practised if possible.

Concentration: This depends on whether the practitioner is performing sarvangasana in conjunction with sirshasana, or if sarvangasana is being done alone, possibly as an alternative to sirshasana.

i) **Sarvangasana practised in conjunction with sirshasana**

Physical and mental benefits: Concentrate on the thyroid, imagining an abundant supply of blood beneficially regulating its operation. The concentration can also be directed to the abdominal respiration or to ensuring general relaxation of the body.

Spiritual benefits: Concentrate on vishuddhi chakra, the psychic centre in the throat region. This is sometimes associated with the thyroid gland.

ii) **Sarvangasana practised alone or as a substitute for sirshasana**

Physical and mental benefits: This is the same as given for sirshasana or the practitioner can concentrate on the thyroid.

Spiritual benefits: Concentrate on either sahasrara or vishuddhi chakra.

Important recommendations

These are the same as detailed in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

People who have weak necks can do this asana, whereas they are advised not to attempt sirshasana.

VARIATIONS OF SARVANGASANA

There are a number of variations of sarvangasana. Since most are only slightly different and give the same effects as sarvangasana, only a few important ones are given in this book.

I. Niralamba Sarvangasana (unsupported shoulder stand pose)

There are two versions of this variation:

Version I: This is also known as the 'balancing shoulder stand pose'. This asana is very similar to sarvangasana, the difference being that after assuming sarvangasana, the arms and hands are carefully removed from behind the back and slowly raised until the arms are straight and in line with the sides of the trunk and the thighs. The arm muscles should be relaxed as much as possible. In this variation it is necessary that the body is perfectly balanced and supported on the shoulders, nape of the neck and back of the head. Practitioners

are advised not to attempt this variation until they can maintain classical sarvangasana without any pressure being applied by the elbows. Also this variation should be done near a wall to prevent loss of balance over the head.

The benefits are exactly the same as for the classical sarvangasana except that the venous blood in the arms is encouraged to drain back to the heart. This puts more effective blood in circulation and rests the veins in the arms. Tradition says that it particularly affects the pineal gland, but if this is so, it must be a marginal improvement on sarvangasana.

Version 2: In this version the arms are extended directly behind the head, so that they lie parallel with each other. This variation can be performed from sarvangasana, by slowly removing the hands from behind the back and placing them on the floor behind the head. This variation gives the same effects as sarvangasana.

2. Oordhwa Padmasana in Sarvangasana (raised lotus shoulder stand pose)

This variation is often known as the 'bound shoulder stand pose'. The name of this pose aptly describes the final position. It can be executed in either of two ways:

- i) Assume padmasana whilst in the sitting position and then elevate the body to sarvangasana by the normal method.
- ii) Assume sarvangasana and do padmasana whilst in the elevated position.

The benefits are the same as for sarvangasana, except that free drainage of blood from the legs is impeded and so the effective blood circulation is reduced. People who want to cure varicose veins will gain little or no benefit from this asana. However, it gives a favourable stretch of the pelvic region, compressing the internal organs and resulting in a particularly good toning of the sexual organs.

Development of Oordhwa Padmasana in Sarvangasana:

People who have supple and strong spinal and back muscles can do an extension of this asana called pindasana in sarvangasana. *Pinda* is the Sanskrit word meaning 'embryo'; in this asana the folded legs are lowered to the ground behind the head and in the final position the body imitates the embryo in the womb.

Starting from oordhwa padmasana in sarvangasana, the practitioner progressively flexes the body at the hip joints until the folded legs are as close as possible to the abdomen. Then, by use of the back muscles, the legs are lowered until they rest on the head. Though it may be difficult, the practitioner should try to breathe normally. At this stage the arms can be removed from their position behind the back and wrapped around the folded legs.

This extension of sarvangasana gives a powerful massage to the abdominal organs and is particularly effective in eliminating constipation. It also makes the spinal and back muscles supple and strong. It can relieve leucorrhoea and other functional disorders of the procreative organs.

Dynamic exercises performed during Sarvangasana

To exercise the leg and back muscles, to increase the massage of the abdominal organs, supplementing the action of the diaphragm, and to assist in eliminating constipation, whilst at the same time obtaining the general benefits of sarvangasana, the dynamic exercises given in the section on sirshasana can be performed, but whilst in sarvangasana.

VIPAREETA KARANI MUDRA (inverted psychic attitude)

In Sanskrit *vipareeta* means ‘inverted’, *karani* means ‘action’, and *mudra* is usually interpreted as a ‘gesture’ that symbolizes externally by means of the body an inner feeling or attitude.

English names of the asanas, though not direct translations of the Sanskrit name, include ‘half shoulder stand pose’, ‘inverted gesture’ and ‘inverted pose’.

Historical information and interpretation

Though its name signifies that it is a mudra, it is generally classified as an asana by present-day authorities, possibly because of its close resemblance to sarvangasana.

Old hatha yoga texts attach great importance to this mudra as the following quotations indicate. In *Gheranda Samhita* (3:45–47), the ancient yoga treatise, it is said:

The solar region is located in the root of the naval and the lunar region is located in the root of the palate. The nectar comes out of the lunar region, is absorbed by the solar region; so do men die.

Direct the solar region upwards and bring the lunar region downwards; this is vipareeta karani mudra, the secret of all tantras.

The head should be placed on the ground together with both arms. Point the legs upwards, keeping the head on the ground. This is vipareeta karani mudra as given by yogis.

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (3:78–81), the authoritative ancient book on yoga, says essentially the same, but adds that

. . . normally the nectar flows from the lunar region to the solar region and wastes. People should perform this vipareeta karani mudra which will preserve this nectar and so give youthfulness and check death. When the

nectar flows to the solar region it is destroyed by heat; the body becomes weak and is unable to withstand disease or live a long life . . . If you do this mudra, within six months flabby skin will disappear; those who practise it for one hour daily can overcome death.

Interpretation of the ancient texts

Though the people of today find these ancient descriptions ambiguous, they nevertheless indicate the high regard that ancient yogis had for this mudra. A possible, though incomplete, interpretation could be that the solar region represents the plexus in the naval region. In fact, in modern medical science a group of nerve plexuses in the naval region are grouped together and known as the solar plexus. The lunar region represents nerves in the region of the mouth, possibly the palatal nerve endings of the pharyngeal branch of the vagus nerve system. The vagus nerve system originates in the brain and sends nerve fibres to the abdominal region together with the heart and lungs. It is possible, but mere supposition, that vipareeta karani mudra stimulates the palatal nerve endings connected to the vagus, or stimulates other nerve centres in the region of the mouth or neck. This causes repercussions in the abdominal plexuses which in turn actively influence many involuntary functions of the body.

An alternative and possibly more plausible interpretation could be that the references in the ancient books to the lunar region in the palate is really the thyroid gland in the neck, while the solar region represents the solar plexus or the abdomen in general. It is the 'power station' of the body, where food is digested and converted into the building blocks of the body and energy necessary to activate the body.

As has already been discussed in the section on sarvangasana, the thyroid influences the metabolism of the whole body including the digestive processes. Correct functioning of the thyroid ensures efficient operation of

the digestive processes and ensures that the body maintains its youthful vitality in agreement with the previously mentioned quotations from the ancient scriptures. Vipareeta karani mudra assists in maintaining the health of the abdomen and thyroid. However, at this stage one might ask, “Why were the ancient yogis so enthusiastic about this mudra when sarvangasana influences the thyroid to a greater degree?”

A possible answer is that vipareeta karani mudra, by not constricting the throat as much as sarvangasana, allows a larger proportion of blood to flow to the brain and to the pituitary gland. Since both the thyroid and pituitary glands act in conjunction with each other, this in effect could give a more profound influence on the bodily metabolism.

One statement by the ancient yogis which is reasonably easy to interpret is their reference to the fact that flabby skin will disappear after six months’ practice of this mudra. As explained in the benefits of inverted poses in general, the extra flow of blood in the facial region gives better nourishment to the skin tissue and so revitalizes the skin. Further, by improving the metabolism of the body, unnecessary fat and flabbiness of the body are removed.

The statement in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* that the loss of nectar prevents the individual from facing disease, also has a physiological interpretation. In the mouth are the tonsils and below the thyroid is the thymus gland, which actively operate to prevent disease occurring in the body by producing anti-bodies to neutralize germs. The extra blood flow to these regions can regularize their activity (see the section on sarvangasana) and so ensure the efficient auto-curative activities of the body.

The important point to consider is that the ancient yogis had profound respect for this mudra and obviously had good reasons. The fact that we cannot exactly interpret and are uncertain of their ideas in terms of modern medical science in no way invalidates vipareeta karani mudra’s important influence on the body.

Alternative meaning of vipareeta karani mudra

A consideration that supersedes the previous discussion in some ways is the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, no detailed description of the method of performing the mudra is given in old texts. The brief description that is given (legs upwards, arms and head on the ground) does in fact describe all inverted poses. The ancient treatises say that the mudra should be learnt from a guru, which is presumably the reason why its technique is not described. It is possible that the vipareeta karani mudra as we know and understand it today is but one version of a number of possibilities, including perhaps sirshasana and sarvangasana. In other words, it is plausible that vipareeta karani mudra was originally a collective name for all the inverted poses, the names sirshasana and the others being of recent origin. This would certainly explain why an asana as important as sirshasana is not even mentioned in the old books, some of which give details of most of the other asanas. This again is mere supposition and for the purposes of this book we will assume that the mudra as we know it today is the same referred to by the ancient writers.

Benefits

The benefits of this mudra are essentially the same as for sarvangasana, but without the specific influence on the thyroid gland. It affects this gland, but to a lesser degree. The blood flow is reasonably well distributed throughout the whole neck and head.

This mudra especially nourishes the tissues of the facial skin, particularly if the muscles of the face are totally relaxed. However, for notable results in this direction the mudra must be practised for a reasonably long duration over a period of many months.

Vipareeta karani mudra is traditionally linked with sex sublimation for spiritual purposes and it is believed that it acts extensively on the gonads, sexual glands. This action on the sexual glands is probably brought about by the simultaneous influence of this mudra on both the pituitary

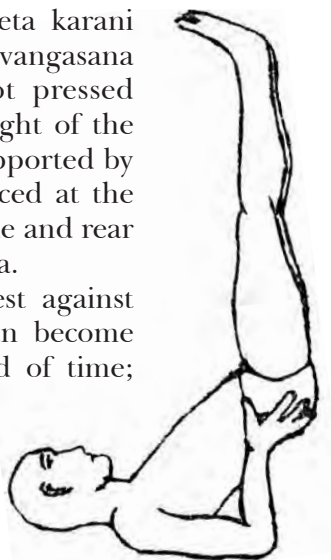
and thyroid glands, which extensively control the operation of the gonads as well as the other endocrinal glands. Whether this mudra produces a notably more favourable influence on the gonads than sarvangasana or sirshasana is questionable.

Technique

The final position of vipareeta karani mudra is very similar to sarvangasana except that the chest is not pressed against the chin and the weight of the legs and trunk is partially supported by the arms with the hands placed at the side of the hips, not at the side and rear of the chest as in sarvangasana.

The compression of the chest against the chin in sarvangasana can become uncomfortable after a period of time; vipareeta karani mudra on the other hand can be practised for extended lengths of time without the slightest discomfort, except possibly tiredness in the arms. For this reason it is an especially good asana for spiritual aspirants.

The method of attaining the final position is exactly the same as for sarvangasana, but with the modified final position. The legs should be straight, relaxed and vertical in the final attitude. The toes should not be pointed. Breathing should be deep, slow and rhythmical. If more comfortable, the legs can be held at an angle above the head.



General considerations

The sections under sarvangasana, duration and concentration, also apply to vipareeta karani mudra.

The counterpose for this mudra is to lie on the back, after lowering the legs, until the breathing becomes normal.

Vipareeta karani mudra can be done as an alternative to sarvangasana, particularly by those people who find sarvangasana difficult and who have stiff necks.

Important recommendations

These are as listed in the general section.

HALASANA (plough pose)

In Sanskrit *hala* means 'plough'. This asana is so called because of its resemblance to a type of plough that has been used in ancient times and is still used widely in India today. The English name of this asana, not surprisingly, is the 'plough pose'.

This is the ideal asana to practise in conjunction with sarvangasana, preferably executing halasana directly from sarvangasana. It is a good preparatory pose for paschimottanasana.

Benefits

Halasana gives the general benefits of all inverted poses, closely imitating sarvangasana, but at a decreased level in the neck, brain and head. This is mainly due to the fact that the venous blood in the legs does not drain to the heart and so the effective blood circulation is not as great as in other inverted poses. Also, for this reason, people who suffer from varicose veins will gain little or no benefit from this asana, unless it is practised in series with sarvangasana or any other inverted pose.

Beside the influences described in the general section for all inverted poses, it gives the following distinctive and important affects on the body.

The spine: Halasana is one of the best asanas for developing and maintaining a supple spine. A definite relationship appears to exist between the flexibility of

the spine and a person's age, not in years but in physical condition and mental attitude. Youthfulness is characterized by a supple spine, whilst senility is characterized by a rigid spine. By helping to maintain or develop a flexible spine, halasana keeps the body youthful and full of vitality.

The thyroid: Halasana ensures the efficient functioning of the thyroid, which also has a large influence on the ageing process. A malfunctioning thyroid tends to enhance the ageing process, whereas a perfectly functioning thyroid maintains youthfulness.

Therefore, halasana acts simultaneously in two directions, spine and thyroid, to maintain youthful vigour in body and mind.

The abdomen: Halasana strengthens the abdominal muscles and so helps to prevent abdominal sagging due to weak musculature. It also assists the drainage of stagnant blood in the abdominal region and so beneficially improves the operation of the abdominal organs. The flexion of the trunk in the region of the abdomen compresses the internal organs and increases the effectiveness of the massage that is imparted to the organs by the motion of the diaphragm (refer to the section on 'Physiological Explanation of the General Effects of all Inverted Poses'). For these reasons, halasana helps to eliminate constipation and dyspepsia and generally revitalizes organs such as the liver, spleen, kidneys, pancreas and suprarenal glands.

It is notably useful in normalizing the size of an enlarged liver and spleen and in curing diabetes by prompting the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas to produce insulin. In fact, many diseases and maladies have their origin in the abdomen and so halasana can produce beneficial repercussions throughout the whole body.

Nervous system: This asana squeezes stagnant blood from the region of the back, encouraging a rich supply of purified blood to the back after completion of the asana. The consequently improved supply of nourishment to this region enhances the operation of the nerves of the spinal cord and

the sympathetic nervous system which runs beside the spine and which innervates the internal organs of the body. The over all result is a general revitalization of the nervous system and the associated functions.

Blood pressure and stress: Halasana is very useful for combating stress and high blood pressure. Refer to the details given in the section on sarvangasana.

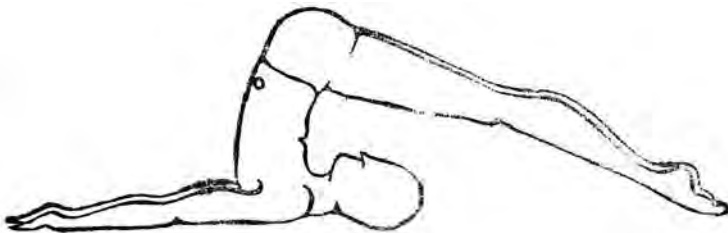
Technique

As has already been mentioned, halasana is ideally practised immediately after sarvangasana, without returning to the supine position on the ground.

The stages (1 to 6) listed after the description of basic halasana are variations which have importance in their own right. They all produce characteristic influences on the body as well as giving the benefits of basic halasana.

For the performance of basic halasana the starting position is sarvangasana. The practitioner should slowly remove the arms from their semi-supportive location behind the back, straighten them and place them flat on the floor, either behind the back or behind the head.

Placing the arms behind the head allows the legs to be more easily lowered to the ground behind the head, but does not provide as much stability as the alternative method. Apart from this, there is little or no difference between the two possibilities and the method adopted is entirely the choice of the individual.



Relax the arms and back as much as possible. Keeping the legs straight, slowly lower them over the head until the toes touch the ground. Maintain this position for a comfortable length of time breathing normally. This is the final position of basic halasana.

If beginners have difficulty in placing their feet on the ground they should not strain or use force, but suspend their feet above the ground for a short period of time and then return to the starting position. After a few days or weeks their spines will become more supple and allow them to successfully perform basic halasana.

Stage 1: After remaining in basic halasana for a suitable duration (see ‘General Considerations’), the toes should be progressively moved as near as possible to the back of the head. The legs should be kept straight. Breathe normally and stay in this position for at least ten respirations. Ensure that the back muscles and spine are as relaxed as possible. In this position, the lumbar-sacral region of the spine or lower back, sustains the maximum flexure and so becomes more supple.

Stage 2: Gradually push the toes away from the head as far as they will go without strain. Ensure that the legs remain straight. Breathe normally and again maintain this position for the same period of time as Stage 1. In this position the upper part of the spine, upper back and neck, sustains the maximum flexion and so becomes more supple.

Stage 3: Assume basic halasana again, with the toes in an intermediate position between Stage 1 and Stage 2. Suitably reposition the arms so that the big toes can be firmly grasped by the fingers and thumb of each hand, the left hand holding the left foot and the right hand holding the right foot.

Push the feet as far backwards as possible, until the back musculature becomes tense due to the anchoring imposed by the arms. Hold the position for a comfortable length of time, breathing deeply and rhythmically.

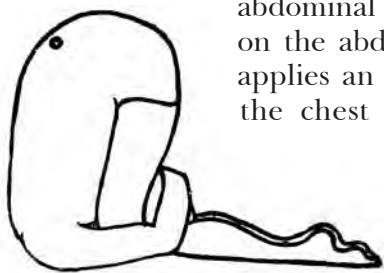
Release the position and relax.

This stage produces a favourable stimulation of the suprarenal glands, encouraging normal secretion of adrenalin and hence giving general vitality to the individual.

Stage 4 – Pashinee Mudra (folded psychic attitude): Bend the legs and bring the knees as near as possible to the shoulders. Then either place the top of the feet flat on the floor and wrap the arms around the legs or raise the legs so that the heels touch the buttocks and raise the arms so that the hands hold the feet. Breathe as deeply as possible, contracting the abdominal muscles whilst exhaling to expel the maximum amount of air from the lungs.

Again, perform for a comfortable length of time. Do not strain.

This stage gives a particularly good stretch of the cervical vertebrae and makes the neck muscles supple. It also further intensifies the intra-abdominal pressure with the consequent beneficial effect on the abdominal organs (refer to the section on the abdomen in halasana). It also applies an intensive pressure between the chest and chin, massaging the thyroid and parathyroid glands and so increasing the diversion of blood through these organs. This variation of halasana is called pashinee mudra.



Stage 4

Stage 5: Move the arms behind the back and interlock the fingers. Push the feet as far away from the back of the head as possible, keeping the legs straight. Apply pressure between the hands and the floor, so that the cervical vertebrae are raised off the floor; the weight of the body being supported by the back of the head, shoulders, hands and arms.

Breathe normally and again perform for a comfortable period of time and then release the muscular tension.

This stage accentuates the flexion of the cervical vertebrae making them supple. Numerous nerve roots are situated in the neck which innervate extensive parts of the body, including the organs associated with respiration and digestion. This stage, together with Stage 4, improves the functional efficiency of the nerves by the massage that they receive and the improvement in their blood supply.

Stage 6: Place the arms behind the head. Hold the big toes with the fingers and thumb of each hand. Ensuring that the legs are straight, slowly spread the arms and legs on either side of the head as far as they will go without strain. Hold the final position for a short while, at least ten respirations if possible, breathing normally. Return to basic halasana and relax.

This stage gives a good stretch in the region of the sexual organs and so helps to regulate their functioning.

Return to the supine position on the ground, with a slow, controlled movement.



Stage 6

General considerations

Beginners: Beginners should take great care that they do not force the body, as it is easy to strain the neck and back muscles, and displace vertebrae. The body should be progressively made more supple over a period of time.

Duration: The duration is determined by the number of stages that the practitioner wishes to do. If all the stages

are executed consecutively, the asana will yield its maximum health benefits. However, not all people have time to complete this series and also do other important asanas. In this case, they should choose the stages that they feel will be most efficacious for them.

However, if one minute is devoted to each stage and to the basic pose, the whole series can be completed in seven minutes. This duration is not excessive, in relation to the benefits the practitioner can obtain.

Those people who want to do halasana for spiritual purposes should merely perform and maintain basic halasana for an extended length of time.

Time of practice: As with all other asanas it should not be practised after meals until three hours have elapsed or immediately after vigorous physical exercise. Since this asana influences the secretion of adrenalin, the hormone that stimulates the whole body, mentally and physically, from the suprarenal glands, it should definitely not be done before going to bed.

Apart from these restrictions halasana can be done at any time of the day. However, to execute the asana smoothly requires a flexible back and spine and the body is usually most supple in the late afternoon or evening. For this reason it is this time of day which is especially recommended.

Concentration: For physical benefits, the concentration should be directed to the area of the body that the practitioner particularly wants to influence, whilst firmly believing that a curative process is in operation. Those people who are doing the asana to maintain the body in a healthy condition can concentrate on the abdomen or the spine.

Spiritual aspirants should concentrate on manipura chakra, the psychic centre located in the naval region, sometimes associated with the solar plexus.

Counterposes: These are the same as for sarvangasana, namely matsyasana, ushtrasana, supta vajrasana or chakrasana. Thus, if halasana is practised immediately after sarvangasana, one of these counterposes will serve

to counteract the tensions in the neck for both asanas. For further details see the section on counterposes for sarvangasana.

Important recommendations

These are as given in the ‘Important Recommendations’ of the general section.

Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas

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Originally published as a booklet in 1974, *Health Benefits of Forward Bending Asanas* gives practical guidance towards a profound experience and understanding of this series of asanas.

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INTRODUCTION

What do you want to achieve? Do you want to maintain or restore good health? Do you have a particular disorder or disease that you want to remove? Perhaps you want to lose weight or regain youthful vitality. Or maybe you want to evolve more spiritually. Regular practice of asanas can give these benefits and more. Further, asanas can definitely help you to face the ups and downs of life with calmness, equanimity and strength, and invaluable assist you in preventing or eliminating mental disorders.

There is little doubt in the minds of most people, whether expert or not, that a mind and body functioning at optimum efficiency, with coordination and harmony between the separate organs, glands, muscles, etc., lead to an individual who is able to execute worldly duties more effectively and who is able to obtain a finer appreciation of life and its possibilities.

Asanas in general can bring about this desirable asset, namely a smoothly operating human organism, without any undesirable side effects such as those produced by prescription drugs, for example, and without the expenditure of large amounts of money, time or equipment.

The asanas described in this book, namely forward bending poses, are essential to maintain suppleness of the vertebral column. There is a definite relationship between age and the flexibility of the spine; youthfulness being characterized by a supple spine and old age by a rigid spine. People who are old in years can remain youthful, physically and mentally, by ensuring that their spine remains in good condition.

Many people avoid forward bending poses because they experience difficulty in bending their backs forward to execute these asanas. These are, in fact, the very people who would derive most benefit from the performance of these asanas. Though most people experience difficulty in the initial stages, even the most rigid spine is amenable to a progressive improvement in its flexibility. Practitioners

should therefore not become discouraged but should practise the asanas regularly and persistently.

This book contains many asanas, too many for most people to do daily, as well as perform other important asanas. The practitioner is therefore advised to choose at least one of these poses and to practise it diligently until he attains a reasonable degree of proficiency. After this has been achieved, the individual can then, if desired, try to execute some of the other forward bending poses. In fact, mastery of one of the forward bending poses indicates that the practitioner has developed a reasonably flexible spine and then little or no problem should be experienced in doing other forward bending poses.

The spine will obtain the optimum benefits if the asanas in this book are practised in conjunction with the following asanas:

- i) Bhujangasana, shalabhasana, dhanurasana which bend the spine backwards;
- ii) Matsyendrasana, which applies torsion to the spine;
- iii) Halasana, which bends the spine in a forward direction.

Asanas listed in this book do not duplicate but supplement halasana, since halasana is most effective in bending the spine whereas the forward bending poses in this book produce the maximum stretch of the spine. Further, halasana predominantly acts on the upper spine, whilst the forward bending poses notably influence the lower spine. Thus these two types of asanas, when done in conjunction with each other, exert the maximum influence on the whole spine in the forward direction.

The forward bending poses are also indispensable for maintaining abdominal organs and the functions they carry out in good working order. People who lead active physical lives generally ensure the good conditioning and functioning of these organs by the continuous massage in the abdomen that they receive. Sedentary people do not impart sufficient massage in the abdomen and it is for these people that forward bending poses will give the most notable benefits.

A yoga teacher will emphasize the importance of relaxation during asana practice. In the same way, those who use a book as a 'yoga teacher', should carefully take heed of this advice. Do every movement with ease, bend the body gently; do not strain. Try to forget everything but the execution of the asana. Don't worry if you cannot do the asana completely. The benefits you require will come by merely doing the asana to the best of your ability. In time suppleness will come by itself even if your practice was imperfect.

PHYSIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

The forward bending poses act chiefly in the regions of the spine and abdomen. Since some of the most vital functions of the body are carried out in these areas, beneficial repercussions throughout the whole body can result from the practice of these asanas.

The most important areas, organs and functions that are affected are discussed in the following text.

The spine and the associated nervous system

To fully appreciate the influence of forward bending poses on the spine and the resulting benefits it is necessary to give a brief description of this vital part of the body.

The vertebral column

The spine is composed of thirty-three bones called vertebrae, extending from the lowest part of the back to the base of the skull. The upper twenty-four are known as 'true vertebrae', since they remain completely separate throughout the whole life and the lower nine are known as 'false vertebrae', since they fuse together in adulthood and become the sacrum and coccyx. The twenty-four vertebrae, which extend from the base of the skull to just below the waist, are divided into three groups: the seven neck or cervical, the twelve upper back or dorsal and the five loin or lumbar vertebrae.

Each individual vertebra, which consists of an arch and a main body, links with the vertebrae above and below. The bodies face forwards and are connected to the adjoining vertebrae by pads or discs of cartilage and ligaments. These discs are soft and pliable and allow, with the action of the strong spinal muscles, extensive flexibility of the spine, and of course the whole body, backwards, forwards, sideways and twisting. At the same time they cushion any shocks on the spine. The arches face backwards and by interlocking with each other form a hollow tube, which contains the most important spinal cord.

The spinal cord

The spinal cord, which forms part of the central nervous system, connects the brain with different parts of the organism and also houses certain centres which control reflex actions, such as urination and defecation. Thirty-one pairs of nerves emerge from the spaces between adjoining vertebrae and split into progressively smaller branches. In this way, the spinal cord innervates the different parts of the body. These nerves transmit messages to and from the central nervous system and the individual parts of the organism in essentially the same way, as telephone calls are made to and from a central telephone exchange.

The autonomic nervous system

Supplementing the central nervous system, functioning to maintain stable conditions and activities of many of the internal organs is the autonomic nervous system.

This system consists of two parts:

a) **The sympathetic nervous system**, composed of a double chain of ganglia, masses of nerve cells, which run beside the spine. These nerves are connected with one another and to the spinal cord, and also innervate internal organs. Among other things, nerves originating from the sympathetic ganglia produce dilation of the pupils of the eyes, secretion of the sweat glands, constriction of the blood vessels in the skin, dilation of the blood vessels to the heart, acceleration of the heart, deepening and quickening of the respiration and reduction both in the secretion of digestive juices and muscular action of the stomach and bowels.

b) **The parasympathetic nervous system**, part of which emerges from the vertebral column in the region of the sacrum and loins, and part of which emerges from the cranium. This system acts in opposition to the sympathetic system, giving the reverse effects.

The functioning of many organs of the body at any particular time is dependent on the balance between these two systems.

These functions of the autonomic nervous system, as the name suggests, are automatic. In other words, they cannot be consciously directed from the brain. Certain yogis, however, can develop control over this system and perform 'impossible' feats, such as stopping the heart or ceasing the act of breathing for periods of time. An example of its functioning is when we feel angry our heart automatically beats faster, our skin flushes and we become less sensitive to pain. Conversely, when we are afraid, our heart may miss a beat, our skin becomes pale and we can feel even the slightest pain.

Spinal problems

The previous brief description of the spine and related nervous system should indicate the importance of maintaining the spine in good condition. However, its health is often neglected, especially among sedentary people, who do not exercise it sufficiently or assume habitually incorrect postures for long periods of time, while at work and play. The spine consequently becomes rigid and the muscles become weak. Quite often the nerve fibres which emerge from the spine between the vertebrae become squashed. This is particularly the case with ailments such as sciatica or slipped disc, where extreme pain can result due to the pressure exerted by certain vertebral discs on the relevant nerves.

A weak spine and a spine which is consistently in a bad postural position can also give rise to permanent deformation such as lordosis or backache and can facilitate the occurrence of slipped disc.

Often the nerves in the spinal cord and surrounding the spine degenerate due to inadequate blood supply. Since these nerves innervate most of the body, including the internal organs, many functional disorders can occur for this reason alone.

The influence of forward bending poses

These asanas strengthen the spinal and back muscles by the rigorous stretching that they undergo, and also help

to correct any misalignment of the individual vertebra or the spine in general. Additionally, these poses increase the separation between neighbouring vertebrae, and thereby help to ensure that the nerve fibres, located between each pair of adjoining vertebrae, are rendered free of interference from the vertebral discs. In this way, many ailments caused by a weak and misaligned spine can be relieved or eliminated.

Further, the blood flow in the spinal region has a tendency to be sluggish. Forward bending poses squeeze this stagnant or semi-stagnant blood from the spinal areas, particularly the pelvis and lower back, returning the blood for recirculation and purification. On terminating the asana, an increased volume of enriched blood flows into the back muscles, the spinal cord, the nerve ganglia and sympathetic nerves that surround the spine, and the parts of the parasympathetic nerves that emerge from the spine in the pelvic region. The overall result is the effective removal of waste matter and toxins and an enhanced supply of nourishment to the muscles and nerves. This in turn encourages a more efficient functioning of these extensive parts of the body. The spinal nerves, as already explained, have connections with most of the organs and so their improved operation will have beneficial repercussions in many seemingly unrelated regions and organs of the body. In this way, many organic malfunctions, in particular, can be rectified and the organs will be allowed to gain their lost vitality.

Besides the improved blood supply, the nervous system in and around the spine is also generally stretched during the forward bending poses. This tends to invigorate the whole system, together with the organs and parts of the body that they innervate.

The abdominal organs

The importance of maintaining healthy abdominal organs has been emphasized by numerous authorities. Some even go as far as saying that the majority of all diseases are partly

or totally caused by inefficient functioning of the abdomen. This might be a slight exaggeration, and does not take into account that many diseases, yoga in fact says all, originate in the mind. However, this statement nevertheless serves to illustrate the importance of keeping the abdominal organs in good condition.

People, who are reasonably active physically, and of course children, rarely experience abdominal disorders. This is because their organs are continually massaged and a good blood supply is encouraged to flow naturally. Also a correctly functioning and physically active body applies continuous and powerful massage to the abdominal organs by the upward and downward motion of the diaphragm during abdominal breathing. This maintains the organs in their optimum condition. A large percentage of people do not breathe abdominally and so these organs do not receive the massage that they require.

Most intestinal problems are not caused by innate organic damage, but merely by malfunctioning of the organs. If the organs are given a chance to function correctly, then most abdominal ailments will disappear.

The general influences of forward bending poses

These asanas can increase the intra-abdominal pressure in a threefold manner:

- i) By application of the thighs against the front wall of the abdomen (some of the asanas press the heels into the abdomen, but the effect is essentially the same). This, of course, is only possible by those who can bend sufficiently far forwards.
- ii) By general contraction of the abdominal muscles, particularly the rectus abdomini, brought about by flexion in the abdominal region and, if the asanas are performed correctly, by voluntary contraction of the abdominal muscles during exhalation.
- iii) By deep abdominal breathing, which the practitioner is advised to do during the asanas. To facilitate the

increased volume of air in the lungs, the diaphragm moves downwards and squeezes the abdominal organs. Normally the front wall of the abdomen simultaneously moves outwards, however, during forward bending poses, this outward movement is restricted by the position of the thighs on the abdominal wall. The result is that the pressure inside the abdomen increases. Again, this is only effective with people who can bend sufficiently far forwards so that the thighs press the abdomen.

The increased intra-abdominal pressure imparts a profound massage to the internal organs and removes impure, sluggish blood. The overall result is an improvement in the tone of the organs by this enhanced blood circulation and a consequent removal of toxins. Supplementing these influences is the stimulation of the nerves which control the functioning of the abdominal organs. This again further helps to ensure the optimum operation of these organs.

Elimination

The forward bending poses are a boon to people who suffer from constipation, since by increasing the intra-abdominal pressure they physically stimulate the action of intestinal peristalsis. This is a series of wave-like motions in the intestines that encourage the faecal matter to move smoothly towards the anus for defecation.

Though constipation has many root causes such as lack of exercise, excessive anxiety and inadequate intake of water, the forward bending asanas attack the problem from various directions. The peristaltic action is stimulated, not only by the increased pressure in the abdomen, but also by the stimulation of the involuntary nerves in and surrounding the spine which control this function. Forward bending poses, as with other asanas, also bring about a general feeling of tranquillity, which in no small way contributes to the removal of constipation.

Digestion

The digestive organs, especially intestines and liver, require a good flow of blood to ensure that the nourishment from the food is absorbed by the blood and distributed to all parts of the body. Both of these organs are especially liable to blood congestion and so the forward bending poses help to remove this condition.

Auxiliary organs associated with the digestive process are also beneficially influenced. The pancreas, for example, which provides various digestive juices, is encouraged to secrete sufficient amounts to ensure the optimum breakdown of food into a manageable condition for absorption into the blood flowing to the intestines. As already explained, the secretion of digestive juices is controlled by a balance between the operation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. This is also beneficially influenced. Thus these poses act on the nerves and the pancreas and help to produce the correct amounts of digestive juices. This helps to eliminate indigestion.

The gastric juice supply to the stomach, authorities say of one or two litres daily, is stimulated by the vagus nerve originating in the brain and by hormones secreted from glands in the lower part of the stomach, the pyloric end. Forward bending poses regulate to a greater or lesser degree the hormonal secretion and so in turn the gastric juice production is balanced.

Further, forward bending poses, as already mentioned, have a particular influence on the liver. One of the many functions of the liver is the production of bile, which is essential for the digestion of fats. These asanas help to ensure that sufficient bile is produced and so in turn enhance the digestive process.

Production of insulin

Insulin, the hormone which regulates the level of blood sugar in the body, is secreted by the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas. This function is also affected and so diabetics

have been found to obtain improvement in their condition by the regular practice of forward bending poses.

Blood purification

The kidneys are influenced by these asanas, and so these organs associated with the purification of the blood, which is of vital importance for a healthy body, together with the excretion of urine are encouraged to function efficiently.

Musculature

Forward bending poses strongly contract the abdominal muscles and stretch the back muscles. This makes them stronger and more able to do their duties.

The pelvic organs

In essentially the same way as the abdominal organs, the pelvic organs also benefit by the blood decongestion that takes place during forward bending asanas, the enriched blood supply after completion, together with stimulation of the associated nerves, notably the parasympathetic nerves emerging from the lower region of the spine. In this way, all the organs of the pelvis are encouraged to function normally and many ailments of these organs are relieved. The influence of the asanas is notable in the following glands:

The prostate gland: This gland, which supplies the fluid for the ejaculation of spermatozoa, tends to cause problems as men become older and often cease to function. Forward bending poses can prevent its gradual malfunctioning and have even been known to reactivate it in cases where it has become inoperative. It should be noted that it is not encouraged to function above its optimum condition, giving super virility, but at its normal level.

The gonads: The gonads, testes in men and ovaries in women, are also influenced, normalizing and maintaining their correct operation and also removing disorders associated with these glands. It should be mentioned here that the gonads or sexual glands do not only control the

production of the sperm in the male and the eggs in the female, but also regulate the development and maintenance of the auxiliary sexual organs.

Thus, forward bending poses, by acting on the gonads, can have extensive repercussions on the whole body and can relieve various types of genito-urinary ailments.

The legs

The legs receive an especially good stretch during forward bending poses, if of course the asanas are done correctly whereby the legs are kept completely straight. The hamstring muscles of the back of the legs are often permanently contracted through inadequate usage. The forward bending poses stretch and tone these muscles and allow them to relax easily after termination of the asana. The articulation of the hip joints is also notably loosened.

HEALTH BENEFITS

As with all asanas, the whole body receives some benefits, even if very small. The following list gives an indication of the parts of the body and ailments that are particularly influenced by the asanas given in this book.

a) Constipation

Forward bending poses, if performed regularly, not all the asanas, but at least one or two, can relieve or eliminate this ailment for the reasons given in the section 'Physiological Influences'. Many people today, due to wrong eating habits, have suffered from constipation for such a large part of their lives that they have accepted it as the normal state of their bodies. They little realize that the accumulation of waste products in their system tends to poison the whole body. This inflammation occurs by bacterial invasion of the walls of the intestines. Poisons are absorbed into the blood and distributed to the whole organism. This can encourage the onset of various diseases. By the simple expedient of doing forward bending poses, this condition can be relieved, if not eliminated.

The general improvement in the digestive functions also assists in preventing stomach ulcers. The root cause of stomach ulcers is believed to be excessive and chronic stress and anxiety. The relative tranquillity that results from doing forward bending asanas and other asanas further helps to combat or prevent ulcers.

b) Gonads and sexual ailments

The great necessity of maintaining a completely healthy set of gonads can not be over emphasized. Many medical scientists associate normal functioning gonads, together with the other endocrinal glands, with vitality, youthfulness, and good physical and mental health of an individual. Thus forward bending asanas, in conjunction with other asanas which affect the other endocrinal glands, help to ensure

that the practitioner maintains or attains an optimum mental and physical condition.

Regularization of the gonads can relieve various sexual maladies such as problems of the uterus, womb, and prostate, including spermatorrhoea, impotence, sterility, painful or irregular menstruation and the often disturbing effects of menopause.

c) Diabetes

The secretion of insulin is normalized by the stimulation of the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas. Diabetes, of course, is a very complex disease for which medical scientists have not yet really found a cure, apart from prescribing a regular dosage of insulin. The cause seems to be associated with prolonged anxiety, overeating and malfunctioning of the pituitary gland and the islets of Langerhans. Forward bending asanas have proved useful in numerous cases of diabetes, by stimulating the secretion of the essential hormone insulin.

d) Back problems

Various ailments of the back respond favourably to regular practice of forward bending poses.

e) Sciatica

This very painful ailment is caused by pressure imposed on the sciatic nerves by certain vertebral discs of the spine. By stretching the vertebral column and freeing these nerves, the pain can be relieved or stopped.

f) Lordosis

This is associated with a weak spine and excessive displacement of the nearby abdominal organs. The resulting curvature of the vertebral column applies pressure on the nearby blood vessels and nerves. Forward bending poses strengthen the spine and back muscles and encourage the spine to assume its correct shape.

g) Backache

The cause of backache has many sources: general stress and worry (which, it is believed, causes muscular contraction and in this context, contraction of the back muscles which in turn causes pressure on the nearby nerves), fatigue, muscular strain, displacement of the vertebrae, particularly the sacroiliac joints, and bad posture of the back during extended periods of sitting or standing in one position. All of these problems can be eliminated or relieved by the regular stretching of the spine, as is obtained during forward bending poses.

More problematic back pains caused by lumbago will also beneficially respond to forward bending poses, but in general not notably. However, people with slipped disc are strictly advised not to practise these asanas.

h) Haemorrhoids

These can be relieved by forward bending poses if practised in conjunction with ashwini mudra.

i) Psychological tension and lack of vitality

Medical science attaches great importance to the solar plexus in the abdominal cavity near the suprarenal glands and defines it as part of the large network of sympathetic nerve ganglia and fibres.

Yogically this region is regarded as a centre of pranic energy, or vital energy that pervades the entire cosmos, which supplies the whole body with vitality and strength. A point that is particularly notable is that this nerve plexus is connected to the suprarenal medulla, which secretes the hormone adrenalin. This hormone, often referred to as the 'fight or flight hormone', prepares the body for emergencies. During periods of fear, anxiety, stress, or any threatening situation, the body automatically becomes functionally more efficient. This is attained by bodily changes brought about immediately by the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, via the central nervous system. This is followed by the secretion of adrenalin into the bloodstream and exactly

duplicates the effects of the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, mobilizing all the resources of the body to help face any emergency condition.

It can be generally stated that chronic over activity of the suprarenal glands in secreting adrenalin or the nervous centres of the solar plexus are associated with mental states of anxiety and stress. During forward bending poses these functions are relaxed and normalized and so mental states of relative tranquillity and calmness can be produced. People who are prone to psychological tension will find these asanas invaluable.

Conversely, under-activity of these functions can be associated with lethargy and lack of energy. By normalizing their activity, forward bending poses can bring about increased vitality to the practitioner.

j) Height and obesity

The powerful extension of the spine during forward bending poses can encourage a permanent, though possibly slight, increase in the practitioner's height, if practised regularly. Quite an appreciable height increase, however, will be experienced if the structure of the spine is deformed in any way. Forward bending asanas can help to remove these deformities and so increase the person's height.

Obese people will, of course, experience more difficulty than most people in executing any of the forward bending poses to any degree of proficiency. However, they should persevere no matter how little they can bend their body forward, since these asanas are extremely effective in removing fat, adipose tissue, particularly in the abdominal region.

Further, by strengthening the abdominal muscles and especially the rectus abdomini muscles, a sagging and protruding abdomen, including the internal organs, is encouraged to return to its normal shape.

The dynamic form of padahastasana is especially recommended for removing obesity and protrusion of the abdomen.

IMPORTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Before attempting any of the asanas described in this book, the following recommendations should be carefully read.

Who should not do forward bending poses?

With perseverance, most people will be able to perform these asanas, though most beginners may find that their spines are so rigid that they cannot bend forward very much during the first few days or weeks of practice. These people should not become discouraged, since even the most rigid spine is amenable to a progressive increase in its flexibility. They should on no account force the spine forwards further than its suppleness will allow, since strain could result.

The following people are advised not to practise forward bending poses:

- Sufferers of slipped discs;
- Women during menstruation and pregnancy;
- People who experience pain in the abdomen, other than indigestion or flatulence.

People who suffer from constipation will derive benefits from the practice of forward bending poses. However, all people who do one or more of these asanas for more than two or three minutes, whether suffering from constipation or not, should keep a check on their bowel movements. Forward bending poses can cause constipation if practised for prolonged lengths of time. This tendency of course depends on the individual and it is up to the practitioner to ensure that this condition does not arise.

Limitations on time of practice

Forward bending poses, as with other asanas, should not be performed:

- Until at least half an hour after strenuous exercise;
- Until at least three hours after food.

Apart from these restrictions forward bending asanas can be practised at any time of the day. However, it is particularly

recommended that they are done in the late afternoon or evening when the muscles of the body generally have their greatest suppleness. Spiritual aspirants should practise them in the early morning before meditation.

Counterposes

Counterposes are *supta vajrasana* or *matsyasana*, although *chakrasana* and *ushtrasana* can serve as substitutes. Beginners who are in the elementary stages of forward bending poses and who can not execute any of the recommended counterposes can do *setu asana*. This is a simple asana, in which the practitioner sits on the ground with the legs straight. The hands are placed on the floor, palms down, with the fingers pointing towards the feet. The whole body is then lifted with the arms straight on each side of the body. The legs, trunk and head should lie in one straight line, the face looking upwards. The weight of the body is supported by the hands and heels.

Premature termination of an asana

If any severe pain is experienced in any part of the body, apart from flatulence or the slight pain due to the stretch of the muscles, the asana should be immediately terminated. The advice of an expert should be sought, if necessary.

Performance for a ‘comfortable length of time’

The term ‘comfortable length of time’ is used extensively in the descriptions of the techniques for executing the asanas to denote a length of time to perform a certain activity. Though this expression might appear to be vague, it is felt that it is the best way of imposing a limitation on the duration of the asana that is applicable to all people. In other words, a given duration may be comfortable for one person, but not for another. The practitioner must, therefore, take heed of his own body, and when he feels discomfort, terminate that particular stage of the asana. If the practitioner feels no discomfort, then he should continue the practise for as long as he feels necessary.

Preliminary asanas

All the forward bending poses are much easier to execute when the body is in its most supple condition. A particularly good asana to ensure maximum flexibility is padahastasana, as described in this book, and so practice of this asana before other forward bending poses is highly recommended.

Concentration

It is of utmost importance to keep the mind concentrated on the regions of the body recommended in the sections on the individual asanas. This is not only important in directing vital forces to these regions, but also in preventing higher, cognitive centres of the brain interfering with activities that are controlled by the lower centres. It is this interference, in fact, that causes many disorders, by not allowing the lower centres to operate correctly, i.e. worry can cause malfunctioning of various parts of the body.

Expenditure of physical energy

The practitioner should remember that asanas are not specifically intended to develop muscles, but are designed to beneficially influence the efficiency and functioning of different parts of the body. Large muscular effort should therefore not be expended during their execution. They should be performed with as much relaxation as is possible.

Asana program

To obtain good benefits on the body and mind, the asanas to be performed by the practitioner should preferably be chosen so that one or more is taken from each of the following classifications:

- i) Inverted poses – sirshasana, sarvangasana, etc.
- ii) Forward bending poses
- iii) Backward bending poses – bhujangasana, shalabhasana, etc.
- iv) Spinal twist poses – matsyendrasana, together with surya namaskara.

People who want relief from a specific ailment should follow the same criterion, but should also choose asanas which are particularly beneficial for their problem. The asana program should be practised at a regular time, daily.

Respiration

The coordination of respiration with physical movements and a specific type of respiration or retention in the final position has been emphasized with the description of the technique of performing each asana. This synchronization is most important since it:

- Increases the effectiveness of the asanas by improving the massage of certain organs.
- Ensures that a type of respiration which is incompatible with the physical posture or motion, is not executed by the practitioner (i.e. inhalation during the forward movement of paschimottanasana).
- Aids the performance of the asana.
- Ensures optimum supply of oxygen to the cells of the body, and in this way helps to improve the health of the body.

The respiration should be through the nose and not the mouth.

Psychological attitude of the practitioner

Asanas are most effective when the practitioner has a positive and tranquil frame of mind. However, those people who feel disinclined to start their asana practice because of their mood, such as stress or laziness should try to overcome this attitude and do their asana program. Asanas are most useful in removing negative moods.

Asanas

PASCHIMOTTANASANA (back stretching pose)

In Sanskrit *paschima* means 'back' or 'posterior' and *uttan* means 'stretching'. The normal English translation of this name is given as the 'back stretching pose'.

This asana has various other names:

- i) Ugrasana, *ugra* meaning 'formidable', 'fierce', 'powerful';
- ii) Brahmacharyasana, *brahmacharya* meaning 'self-restraint' and 'celibacy';
- iii) Paschimatanana, same meaning as paschimottanasana.

Esoteric meaning

The exoteric meaning of the most common name of the asana paschimottanasana has already been explained. However, there are also various esoteric meanings of the name.

i) The word *tan* or *uttan* means to 'stretch', as in tantra, the ancient teachings akin to yoga. The *uttan* in this context is generally interpreted not to mean physical stretching, but stretching or expansion of consciousness. Thus paschimottanasana, *paschima* maintaining its meaning of back, can mean 'the asana which causes unleashing of spiritual forces which travel up the back or spine', or more likely up the *sushumna*, the most important *nadi* or subtle nerve channel through which energy or *prana* flows, and expansion of consciousness.

ii) In this case, the esoteric meaning is in fact the same as in (i), but with a different derivation. In Sanskrit the word *paschima* means not only back, but also ‘west’. Ancient Indian tradition refers to the whole back as the western, the front of the body as the eastern, the top of the head as the northern and the soles of the feet as the southern aspects of the body. This is in a physical sense. In a spiritual sense the western aspect can mean the subtle nerve channel in the back, sushumna. Thus in a physical sense the name of the asana can be interpreted to mean ‘the stretching of the western aspect or back’ and in a spiritual sense ‘the asana that causes the ascension of spiritual forces in the west or sushumna’.

Spiritually, this ascending force is most important, since it connects or unites with the sahasrara chakra, the centre of consciousness, in the brain.

Historical information

The ancient sages had a high regard for this asana, as can be realized from the following extracts from classical books.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika (1:28–29) describes it:

Knees straight and forehead on the knees, hands on the toes in a sitting position. It directs vital energy into the back especially inside the sushumna, the digestive power is increased, the obesity reduced. Man becomes free of diseases and maintains the body in a healthy condition.

The method of performance is described in both the *Gheranda Samhita* and the *Shiva Samhita* in essentially the same way as in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. In the *Shiva Samhita* (3:92), it is praised as one of the most important asanas and adds that, “a person who perfects this asana and practises it daily, encourages the *vayu*, vital energy, flow through the back in the subtle nerve passage, sushumna.”

Benefits

Physical and psychological benefits are as enumerated in the general section entiteled 'Physiological Influences' and 'Health Benefits'.

To obtain spiritual benefits the asana must be performed for extended lengths of time. The duration is entirely up to the discretion of the individual and there is no limit. Paschimottanasana acts particularly to decongest the subtle pranic channels of the spine, allowing prana to flow without obstruction. This vital energy is allowed to pervade the whole body, producing vitality and ease in directing spiritual energy, kundalini, to the sahasrara chakra.

The asana also assists in maintaining celibacy and so helps to sublimate sexual energy towards spiritual directions.

Technique

There are numerous methods of executing paschimottanasana, far too many to enumerate in this book. Some techniques require the practitioner to start on the back, others from a sitting position; some suggest that the arms should be initially raised above the head and others consider that the starting position is of no consequence. Many reasons can be cited for giving preference for one method over the other. However, all these variations contribute very little advantage over their alternative, especially when one considers that it is the final position that gives the majority of the benefits, and this is essentially the same for all the alternatives.

The method described here is one that gives optimum relaxation of the body. This is important with all asanas, but with this asana it is especially essential to relax the back and spinal muscles to allow the spine to bend forwards as much as possible. In this way, maximum benefits will result. Even the slightest muscular contraction will impede the forward bending to a greater or lesser extent. In fact, before commencing

the execution of the asana it is advisable to spend a few seconds consciously ensuring that these muscles are as passive as possible.

Stage 1: Sit on the floor with the legs straight and resting on the floor in front of the trunk.

Place the hands on the knees, palms downwards.

Breathe calmly a number of times, whilst relaxing the body as much as possible, particularly the back and spinal muscles.

Stage 2: Whilst exhaling slowly move the trunk forwards and move the hands along the legs towards the feet. To obtain a greater forward bend, beginners will be tempted to bend their legs. This temptation should be resisted no matter how little the practitioner can bend his trunk forwards. The legs should remain straight and flat on the floor throughout the execution of the asana. The practitioner should try to progressively bend each vertebra in turn, starting from the lower back and working towards the upper back.

Beginners should move their arms forward along the legs as far as the flexibility of their back will allow them. They should not use force to produce more flexion.

People who have more supple backs should try to touch their knees with their forehead, whilst grasping their big toes with the thumbs and fingers. The practitioner can grasp each big toe with the thumb and index finger, the thumb and middle finger, or any other way that is comfortable.

At the end of this stage both beginners and adepts should ensure that the whole body is as relaxed as possible, whilst breathing slowly and deeply. Beginners should maintain this position for a few respirations, return to the starting position and repeat this process a number of times.

Stage 3: People who can touch their forehead to the knees should try to move their forehead further towards the feet whilst exhaling. Exhalation allows further bending

of the spine by reducing the resistance of the abdomen. The movement of the head towards the feet should not be executed by using the back muscles but only by pressing the elbows of the arms towards the floor and pulling the arms strongly. This is particularly important to ensure that the back muscles remain passive. The pulling of the arms also allows the muscles of the backs of the legs to relax, whilst simultaneously stretching them to the maximum. After the head has moved slightly forward, maintain the position and slowly inhale. Then, while exhaling, again pull the head slightly further towards the feet, maintain the position and again inhale. Repeat this process until the head can no longer move forwards. Do not strain. This is the final position for adepts.

The legs should still be kept completely straight. In this position the back should be as straight as possible, the abdomen and chest as near the thighs as possible. Those who are able to, and this is difficult for most people, should press their abdomen against the thighs, to accentuate the efficacy of the asana.

Breathe deeply in the final position, contracting the abdominal muscles as much as comfortably possible during exhalation. This increases the massage of the abdominal organs and consequently the efficacy of the asana. Maintain this position for a comfortable length of time and then slowly return to the starting position, proceeding in the reverse order from Stage 3 to Stage 1. Ensure that the vertebrae assume their normal positions progressively.



Points to note whilst performing the asana

1. Ensure that the respiration is coordinated with the physical movements.
2. If possible, try to hold the big toes with the fingers and thumbs in preference to any other part of the legs or feet. This is not only important in providing a fixed pulling point for the arms, but also in ensuring, by the levering action, that the legs are simultaneously as straight and relaxed as possible.
3. Under no circumstances should excessive force be used.

Useful exercises performed in the final pose

The benefits obtained during this pose can be accentuated and further supplementary benefits obtained by doing the following:

- i) Slowly and rhythmically contract the sphincter muscles of the anus whilst exhaling, completely relaxing the muscles during inhalation. This exercise is known as ashwini mudra. This can be performed in conjunction with the contraction of the abdominal muscles during exhalation. Paschimottanasana effectively decongests stagnant blood in the pelvic and abdominal regions. This supplementary exercise, however, accentuates this action, particularly in the genito-urinary organs. In this way, ailments of these organs are effectively relieved or removed. Though paschimottanasana alone is very efficacious in cases of piles or constipation, the elimination of these disorders is more pronounced when performed in conjunction with ashwini mudra.
- ii) From the final static position, slowly move the head as far as possible towards the trunk, keeping the forehead in contact with or near the legs. The back should be curved upwards as much as possible and the hands eventually placed on the sides of the knees, the forearms beside the thighs. Then by pushing with the arms the curvature of the back should be further accentuated. Whereas the final pose of paschimottanasana produces the maximum

elongation of the back, this exercise produces the maximum flexion of the back.

General considerations

Beginners will generally experience great difficulty in doing this asana, some not even being able to grasp their feet, let alone resting their foreheads on the knees. They should not despair, but persevere with daily practice of this asana. They should bear in mind that the distance between the hip joints and the big toes is much less than between the hip joints and the fingers and so this asana is not physically impossible.

Those people who cannot reach their toes should bend forward and grasp their legs as near as possible to the feet. With regular daily practice, they will be surprised to find that they can eventually grasp their toes. From this stage they can progressively improve their execution of this asana.

Beginners are advised to keep their legs straight, regardless of how little they are able to bend forwards. Some authorities suggest that people who cannot touch their toes with their legs remaining straight, should bend them and grasp the toes and then slowly try to straighten the legs. However, we do not recommend this technique, since no effective stretch of the back of the legs is given and this is necessary for mastering paschimottanasana. The powerful leverage on the back caused by the force of the legs could result in strain, since the back and spine are particularly stiff in beginners. In the recommended method, the forward flexion of the back is not achieved by any undue force and so strain is unlikely to occur.

Duration

As with all asanas, the duration of paschimottanasana depends on what benefits the practitioner wants to obtain. For spiritual aspirants it can be said that the longer the maintenance of the final static pose the better. For general

physical or mental health, a few minutes are sufficient, though the time can be extended to obtain benefits for specific ailments.

As has already been pointed out, people who do this pose for more than a few minutes should ensure that it does not cause constipation. Beginners should progressively increase the duration by a few seconds daily, starting from only a few seconds. They can repeat the asana a number of times to make the spine supple.

Concentration

For physical or mental benefits the concentration should be on the abdomen or solar plexus.

For spiritual benefits the concentration should be on the swadhisthana chakra, sometimes associated with the hypogastric plexus, or the manipura chakra, sometimes associated with the solar plexus or the pancreas.

During the movement from the starting position to the final pose, the concentration should be directed on ensuring synchronization between the breath and the physical movement and also on ensuring maximum relaxation of the muscles.

Important recommendations

People who should not attempt this asana, the counterposes, time of practice and other recommendations are as given in 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

JANU SIRSHASANA (head to knee pose)

In Sanskrit *januh* means 'knee' and *sirsha* means 'head'. The usual English translation is therefore given as the 'head to knee pose'. It is also sometimes known as ardhha paschimottanasana, 'half back stretching pose'.

Benefits

This asana is very similar to paschimottanasana and the benefits are essentially the same and are as given in the general sections. However, each leg alternately receives:

- Stretching in the region of the hamstring muscles when straight on the floor.
- Powerful exercise for the articulation of the knee and thigh joints when folded.

This makes the legs generally supple and in good condition for meditation asanas. The pelvic organs are also notably stretched by the exaggerated separation of the two thighs. This beneficially influences the pelvic organs and nerves and helps to make them healthy.

Technique

Stage 1: Assume a sitting position with the legs straight and in front of the body.

Bending the left leg, place the left heel against the side of the left thigh in the region of the perineum or as near as possible. Ensure that the left knee is in contact with the ground, where it should remain for the entire practice of the asana.

The knees should be separated as much as is possible.

Stage 2: Leaning slightly forwards, grasp the right foot with both hands. The recommended method is to hold the right big toe with the index finger, and if required, the middle finger and thumb of the right hand, the left hand grasping the right foot below the toes.

If beginners are unable to grasp the big toe or foot, then they should hold the leg as near as possible to the foot.

Stage 3: For a few seconds relax the whole body, particularly the back muscles.

Then whilst exhaling and contracting the arm muscles, not the spinal or back muscles, progressively and slowly bend the body forwards, so that the face eventually touches the knee or as near as possible.

The back should remain straight, the flexion occurring predominantly in the region of the lower back.

Ensure that the right leg does not bend and try to keep the left leg in contact with the ground.

Stage 4: Breathe normally for a few seconds, consciously relaxing the whole body.

Then, using the arms, try to pull the head slightly further towards the right foot, whilst exhaling.

After the head has moved a little towards the right foot, remain in a static position and then inhale.

During the next exhalation again try to pull the head a little further forwards, and again maintain a static position whilst inhaling.

Repeat until the head moves as far forward as the flexibility of the spine will allow.

Do not strain, and ensure that the back, spinal and leg muscles are as relaxed as possible.

In the final position breathe slowly and deeply, contracting the abdominal muscles during exhalation to impart maximum massage to the internal organs.

Remain in the final position for a comfortable length of time. Return to the starting position in the reverse order, from Stage 4 to 1.

Repeat with the right leg bent and the left leg straight.



ARDHA PADMA PASCHIMOTTANASANA (half lotus back stretching pose)

In Sanskrit *ardha* means 'half' and *padma* means 'lotus'. The English translation can be given as the 'back stretching pose in half lotus'.

This asana is very similar to janu sirshasana, except that one of the legs is folded so that the foot rests on top of the opposite thigh. Therefore, only those people who can perform padmasana, lotus pose, can do this asana.

Benefits

The benefits obtainable from this asana are the same as for paschimottanasana, with one notable difference. Though paschimottanasana gives an extensive massage of the abdomen, which results in a large number of benefits, this asana further intensifies the massage. The foot of the folded leg presses powerfully on one side of the abdomen, especially in the region of the colon. When the asana is repeated with the opposite leg folded, the other side of the abdomen receives a similar effective massage. It particularly influences the peristaltic action of the intestines and so is especially beneficial in removing constipation.

In this context it should be remembered that faecal matter in the bowels moves up the ascending colon in the right side of the abdomen and then down the descending colon located in the left side of the abdomen before leaving through the anus. Thus it is important that the left leg is folded first, with the left foot pressing against the right side of the abdomen, so that the influence of the asana on the colon is consistent with the movement of faeces.

The other organs of the abdomen, of course, also receive an accentuated massage: the liver when the left leg is folded and the spleen when the right leg is folded; the two kidneys each receive an equal massage alternately and the pancreas receives an approximately equal massage from each foot in turn.

To obtain the maximum possible massage of the internal organs it is necessary that the foot presses firmly into the abdomen. To achieve this, the forward bend of the trunk must be as much as the individual's spine will comfortably allow.

This asana is also useful for improving the practitioner's ability to comfortably do the lotus pose, which is most important for meditation practices, by loosening the articulation of the joints of ankles, knees and hips.

Technique

Sit on the floor, legs straight.

Fold the left leg and place the left foot on the right thigh. The higher the foot is on the thigh, the greater will be the subsequent abdominal massage and consequent benefits.

The heel should press the abdomen and the toes be pointed.

Those people who are able should place their left arm behind the back and try to grasp the toes of the left foot.

This is facilitated by exhaling deeply and leaning the trunk slightly forwards.

Those people who can't grasp the toes with the left hand should try to hold the instep of the right foot, or failing this, the leg as near as possible to the right foot.

However, the left hand should ideally hold the left toes, since this further accentuates the massage of the abdomen, by pulling the heel firmly into the abdomen.



The right hand should now hold the big toe of the right foot. Again failing this, hold the leg as near to the right foot as possible.

The procedure is now exactly the same as Stages 3 and 4 of janu sirshasana.

Repeat the procedure with the right leg folded on the left thigh.

PARIVRITTI JANU SIRSHASANA (spiralled knee to head pose)

The Sanskrit word *parivritti* means ‘revolved’, ‘spiralled’. The English name can be given as the ‘spiralled knee to head pose’. In the final position of this asana both trunk and spine are simultaneously twisted and bent forwards.

Benefits

Abdominal organs: These are massaged, as with all forward bending poses, but under special circumstances: one side of the abdomen is stretched, whilst the other side is contracted. Repeating the twist in the opposite direction ensures that both sides of the abdomen alternately receive a compression and a stretch. In this way, all the internal organs benefit to a greater or lesser extent.

As with both janu sirshasana and ardha padma paschimottanasana, this asana should be performed in a particular sequence by those people who suffer from constipation. The faecal matter moves along the ascending colon on the right side of the abdomen and then eventually along the descending colon in the left side of the abdomen. Therefore, it is advisable to compress the right side of the abdomen first. Thus the practitioner should first twist to the left side of the body during the practice of this asana.

The lungs: During the asana, half of the thoracic cage or chest is stretched and the other half is compressed. The lungs respond to all changes of shape of the thoracic cage, this in fact being part of the action of breathing. The

thoracic or ribcage expands as inhalation occurs, and during contraction exhalation takes place. Thus during the practice of this asana the lungs are powerfully exercised, even more than during deep respiration, assuming a reasonable degree of twist is achieved.

Technique

Stage 1: Perform Stage 1 of janu sirshasana.

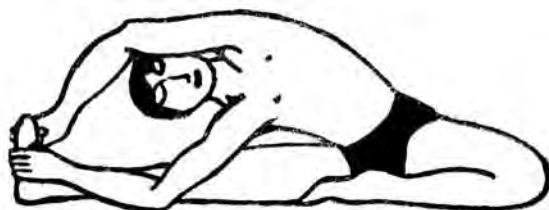
Stage 2: Bend forwards whilst inclining the trunk slightly to the right. Hold the right foot with the right hand, so that the fingers are in contact with the instep and the thumb on top of the foot, the palm upwards. The elbow should be placed on the inside of the leg as near as possible to or preferably on the ground. Move the right shoulder towards the straight leg.

Stage 3: Bring the left arm over the head and grasp the right leg above the right hand. The left hand fingers should hold the top of the right foot and the thumb the instep. Both thumbs should be inclined downwards in this position.

Stage 4: Contracting the two arms, the right shoulder should be slowly pulled as far as is comfortably possible towards the right foot. Whilst exhaling, ease the side of the head under the left arm and try to twist the trunk as much as the practitioner's body suppleness will allow without excessive strain.

Try to keep the head as near the ground as possible and the face turned upwards.

This is the final position.



Though difficult, try to breathe normally. Maintain the static pose for a comfortable length of time and then return slowly to the starting position.
Repeat with the other leg folded.

Duration

Do not try to maintain this pose for an extended length of time if any discomfort is experienced, since the lungs might be harmed by the abnormal respiration.

KOORMASANA (tortoise pose)

The Sanskrit word *koorma* means ‘tortoise’. The English name of this asana is therefore the ‘tortoise pose’.

Ancient Hindu scriptures say that this asana symbolizes Kurma, the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu, the sustainer of the universe. During the final position of the asana, the back of the body represents the shell of the tortoise, and the arms and legs the four limbs. This pose is also said to represent *pratyahara*, withdrawal of association of the senses with outer objects. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:58) this analogy is tersely mentioned:

When also, like a tortoise with its limbs, the individual can withdraw the senses from sense objects, his wisdom is then firmly set.

When the practitioner becomes sufficiently supple to execute this asana with ease, it can be used to obtain *pratyahara* together with tranquillity and stability of the mind and nervous system.

Benefits

Koormasana influences the body in essentially the same way as all the forward bending poses (refer to the general section) and so the same benefits result. However, when this asana is developed to a reasonable degree of perfection, the region of the lower back receives a notably intense flexion and the

abdomen is consequently compressed. The overall effect has advantageous repercussions on the abdominal organs, the nervous system and the vertebral column.

Anxiety and lethargy: This asana notably influences the solar plexus, the so called 'abdominal brain' which is associated with strong emotions. During times of stress, anxiety and anger, people are especially recommended to do this asana for a few minutes. The practitioner will attain calmness and equanimity of the mind. Conversely, feelings of lethargy can be effectively removed by this asana.

Technique

Stage 1: Sit on the ground, the legs slightly bent and the feet separated by about half a metre.

The heels should rest on the floor.

Stage 2: Whilst exhaling, bend the trunk forwards and place the hands under the knees, palms facing upwards. Slowly slide the arms, keeping them as straight as possible, under the legs, so that they move both sideways and backwards, the elbows near the back of the knees. Breathe normally for a short time, ensuring that the back and spine are relaxed and passive.

Stage 3: Slowly push the heels forward to straighten the legs as much as possible. During this action the back and spine should undergo a passive flexion, due to the leverage imposed by the legs on the arms. Beginners will probably experience difficulty in achieving an appreciable forward movement of the trunk. They should not strain or become discouraged; with regular practice this stage will become easier and easier.



By pushing the feet forwards, the head should be progressively brought nearer to the ground in stages: exhale, bend further forward; remain immobile and inhale; whilst exhaling, bend still further forward, and so on.

When the practitioner's trunk is bent forward as far as the flexibility of the back and spine will allow, relax and breathe deeply. Those people with supple muscles may be able to touch the forehead on the ground, or even the chin. By pushing the chin forwards, the back will receive maximum flexion, especially in the lower back, and the maximum benefits will be obtained.

In the final position, try to bring the fingers of both hands as close together as possible behind the back, under the buttocks. Breathe deeply, relax the whole body and remain in the final position for a comfortable period of time.

Slowly return to the starting position.

EKA PADA SIRSHASANA (one foot to head pose)

In Sanskrit *eka* means 'one', 'single', *pada* means 'foot', and *sirsha* means 'head'. The English name for this asana can be given as the 'single foot to head pose'.

Though we have classified this asana as a forward bending pose, in fact, the trunk remains nearly vertical; as one of the legs is raised from the ground. However, the action of this asana on the body, which is the main consideration, is the same as bending the trunk forwards onto one leg.

Benefits

The benefits are essentially the same as discussed in the general section, but with a few additional advantages.

The chief characteristic of this asana is that one side of the abdomen is compressed with the raised leg, whilst the other side is comparatively unaffected. This process is repeated in the opposite sense when the other leg is raised.

The overall result is that the internal organs on both sides of the abdomen receive in turn a powerful massage.

Constipation: As was explained in more detail in the section on ardha padma paschimottanasana, the order in which each side of the abdomen is compressed is of the utmost importance, especially for people suffering from constipation. To apply alternate pressure on the colon in the same direction as the movement of faecal matter, the right leg should be raised first.

The liver: The liver, which performs numerous functions of the body, is particularly well compressed when the right leg is raised. The liver is therefore well decongested and this helps to make the whole body function more efficiently.

The legs: If each leg is raised for a reasonable length of time, venous blood in the legs, which often has a propensity to stagnate, is encouraged to drain to the heart for recirculation, and purification by the lungs and kidneys. This asana is therefore useful for people with varicose veins or who have general tiredness in the legs.

Technique

Stage 1: Assume a sitting position with the legs straight and in front of the body. Bend the left leg slightly. Hold the left foot with the right hand, the fingers located in the region of the ankle on the outside and the palm in contact with the side of the heel.

The left hand fingers should be wrapped around the left leg, slightly above the ankle, towards the knee, so that the arm lies beside the inside face of the left leg.

Stage 2: With the assistance of the arms and hands raise the leg as high as possible. Bend the trunk



Stage 2

slightly forwards whilst twisting the spine so that the back faces the raised leg as much as possible. Endeavour to place the left leg on top of the shoulder.

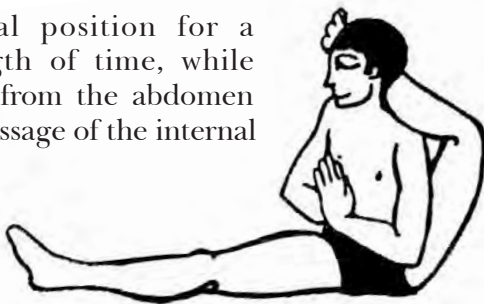
Release the grip of the left hand and place this arm so that it lies under the left thigh with the hand reaching towards the buttocks.

Stage 3: Using the right arm and muscles of the left leg, raise the foot as far upwards and backwards as is comfortable without strain. Then using additional leverage of the left arm against the left thigh raise the leg further and try to move the head under the calf and place the foot on the nape of the neck.

Bring the hands together in front of the chest, palms together and try to straighten the back as much as possible.

Stay in the final position for a comfortable length of time, while breathing deeply from the abdomen to intensify the massage of the internal organs.

Return to the starting position and repeat the same procedure with the right leg.



Stage 3

PADAHASTASANA (hand to foot pose)

Pada in Sanskrit means 'foot' and *hasta* means 'hand'. In English the name of this asana should logically be the 'foot to hand pose', but in fact it is usually known as the 'forward bending pose'.

This asana can be described as a standing version of paschimottanasana. It can be conveniently practised at any time during the day when the individual has a few spare minutes. Its regular practice will help ensure that the body remains in the peak condition and it will relieve or eliminate

the ailments discussed in the section entitled 'Health Benefits'. It can also be conveniently performed at any time of the day to remove fatigue.

Benefits

Besides the benefits enumerated in the general section, this asana also has the following distinctive influences.

The brain and endocrinal glands: The inversion of the trunk channels an improved blood flow to the head, especially the brain. The body can only operate as efficiently as the brain will allow. Therefore, if the brain is not functioning correctly then the body cannot possibly operate as well as it should. In fact, most people who live inactive, sedentary lives, though they might think that their brain is functioning perfectly, generally live a life that is not the optimum. This is chiefly due to inadequate nourishment of the brain as a consequence of poor blood circulation.

Of course the best asanas to ensure a good blood flow to the brain are the inverted poses. However, the inverted poses generally require a special place to practise them and a blanket. The alternative is to use padahastasana, which can be done anywhere without preparation or formality, which gives a reasonably good influence on the brain and which further gives the other benefits described in this book.

Padahastasana also improves the blood circulation to the pituitary gland in the head and the thyroid gland in the neck.

The numerous benefits that can result from good blood circulation to the brain and the pituitary and thyroid glands are too many to mention in this book, but the following is a brief summary:

- Mental tranquillity, removing anxiety, stress or excitability
- Improved concentration
- Improved metabolism
- Improved facial complexion
- Relief of many psychological ailments
- Removal of many nasal and throat diseases.

To obtain noticeable effects the asana should be maintained for a few minutes to allow the increased flow of blood to adequately circulate in the upper parts of the body.

Obesity: This condition can be very effectively reduced by doing padahastasana dynamically. In other words, instead of remaining in the static phase, repeat the movement between the standing position and the final position as many times as possible (see the description of the dynamic form). This process should be repeated a number of times daily for maximum efficacy.

Technique

The practitioner should endeavour to keep the legs straight throughout the whole practice.

Stage 1: Stand upright with the feet together and the arms beside the body. An alternative is to put the arms above the head, but no notable advantage results from this. Breathe normally for a short period whilst relaxing the entire body, especially the back muscles.

Stage 2: Inhale, then whilst exhaling slowly, and with as little muscular activity as possible, let the head and then the trunk slowly and progressively bend forwards. Allow the arms to remain completely relaxed and to dangle vertically towards the floor. Imagine that the body has no bones or muscles!

At the end of the exhalation the head and trunk should point downwards. Remain immobile in this position for a short time, breathing normally and ensure that the body is relaxed.

Stage 3 (for beginners): Hold the legs with the hands as near as possible to the feet, the palms in contact with the back of the legs. With practice it should be possible for most people to eventually hold the back of the ankles. Using the arm muscles but without excessive force, slowly move the forehead towards the knees whilst exhaling. Try to touch the knees. If this is impossible, maintain

the lowest possible position for a comfortable length of time breathing slowly and deeply, and then return to the starting position.

An alternative method is to place the arms behind the legs and hold the wrist of one arm with the hand of the other arm. Place the hands as near to the backs of the ankles as possible. Using the arms, pull the head towards the knees in the same way as the first method.

The practitioner should find the method that is most suitable by practical experience.

Stage 4: Practitioners who can easily touch their toes, but who cannot place their palms flat on the ground should perform this stage with their thumbs, index and middle fingers holding the big toes. This variation is known as *pada angushthasana*, 'tiptoe pose'.

People who can place their palms flat on the ground should place their hands under the feet, the palms upwards, either (i) with the wrists in contact with the toes and the fingers pointing towards the heels, or (ii) with the wrists touching the outside edge of the feet near the toes, the fingers of each hand pointing towards each other. Both of these methods qualify as *padahastasana* and the practitioner can adopt either method.

Ensure that the legs are straight. Whilst exhaling, contract the arm muscles and pull the forehead to touch the knees, or as near as is possible. Remain immobile and inhale. Whilst exhaling, try to bring the crown of the head a little nearer to the ground, keeping the forehead near to or touching the legs. Immobilize the body and inhale. Exhale and try to move the head still further towards the feet. Repeat this process until the head is as low as the



flexibility of the back will permit. The individual will be more than surprised to find, after trying this technique that he can bend forwards even more than he dreamed! This is the final position.

Maintain this position for a comfortable length of time, breathing deeply and contracting the abdominal muscles during exhalation. This ensures maximum massage of the internal organs.

Release the hands and slowly return to the standing position whilst inhaling.

Points to note whilst performing the asana

1. The legs must remain straight, so that they receive the maximum muscular stretch. The beginner might feel happy if he can touch the floor with his hands, even though his legs are bent nearly double. However, he is cheating himself and defeating the object of the asana. With regular practice, the muscles of the back of the legs will slowly elongate and it will become progressively easier to maintain them straight without effort during the asana.
2. Do not strain the hamstring muscles, by using excessive force. Only force the muscles until a slight pain or tension is experienced. The spine should be gently stretched in the final position, without any sudden jerking.
3. Ensure that the respiration is coordinated with the physical movements in the way described. This improves the efficacy of the asana and enables it to be performed more easily.

DYNAMIC FORM OF PADAHASTASANA (dynamic forward bending)

This is a very useful exercise for making or maintaining the body in good health. It also removes excess fat from the body, especially in the abdominal region.

Technique

Stand erect with the feet together and the legs straight.

Consciously relax the whole body, especially the back muscles for a short time. Raise the arms above the head and lean backwards slightly, stretching the whole body. Inhale deeply.

Then, whilst exhaling, bend forwards and try to touch the hands on the floor. If this is impossible then touch the fingers on the ground. Beginners may even find this impossible, in which case they should merely bend their trunk as far forward as is comfortable, stretching their fingers towards the floor.

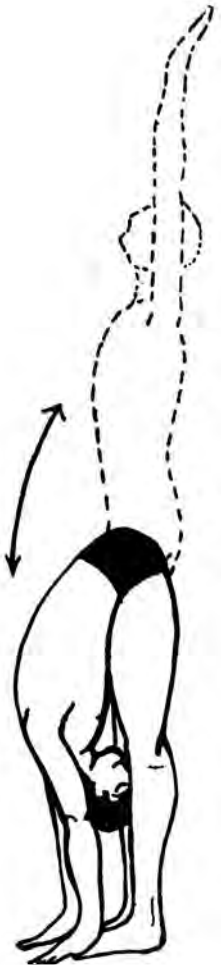
The legs should remain straight.

Retain the bent position for a few seconds whilst holding the breath outside.

Return to the erect position again whilst inhaling.

Stay in this position for a short time, retaining the breath inside.

Bend forward again whilst exhaling and repeat the whole process.



Duration

Try to do the asana as many times as possible without excessive fatigue. Advanced practitioners can do it up to thirty times daily.

UTTHITA JANU SIRSHASANA (standing head between knees pose)

The Sanskrit word *utthita* means 'raised' or 'upwards', *janu* means 'knees' and *sirsha* means 'head'. This asana is so called because the head is placed between the knees and the face is directed upwards.

Benefits

It has exactly the same benefits as padahastasana but with a more intense influence in the back and abdominal regions. The benefits are as given in the general sections entitled 'Physiological Influences' and 'Health Benefits'.

Technique

There is an alternative version of this asana, where the feet remain together and the palms are placed behind the heels. This is the most difficult version and the one outlined here is felt to be more suitable for most people.

Stage 1: Stand upright with the arms straight and beside the body. Separate the feet so that they are about half a metre apart. The most suitable distance should be found by the practical experience of the practitioner.

Stage 2: Execute Stage 2 described for padahastasana.

Stage 3: Bend the legs and whilst exhaling wrap the arms around the back of the knees. Place the fingers on the nape of the neck. Relax the body for a short time whilst breathing normally.

Exhaling, try to straighten the legs without allowing the fingers to slip from their position at the nape of the neck. A certain degree of force must be applied by the arms and the legs, but not an excessive amount that could cause strain.

This powerful leverage causes an accentuated stretching of the vertebral column and compression of the abdomen.

In the final position, whether the legs are straight or not, breathe as deeply as possible, contracting the abdominal muscles at the completion of each exhalation. This further improves the massage of the internal organs.

Remain in this pose for a comfortable length of time, then release the hands and arms and slowly return to the standing position.



Notes

1. Ensure that the respiration is coordinated with the physical movements and as described in the final position.
2. Slowly try to straighten the legs: a sudden and forceful straightening of the legs could result in severe muscular strain, and this is certainly not the aim of the asana.

General considerations

These are the same as for paschimottanasana with the exception of the section for beginners, since this is definitely not a pose to be done by beginners.

Recommendations

Recommendations on counterposes, concentration and other relevant details are given in the general section.

YOGA MUDRA (attitude of psychic union)

The Sanskrit word *yoga* means 'union' and a *mudra* is an external action of the body, which symbolizes an 'inner feeling or attitude'.

This mudra is so called because it is said to unite the practitioner with the inner being and because it has a powerful influence in helping to unleash kundalini.

The most common English name of this asana is the 'symbol of yoga'. The name does not, in fact, really convey the Sanskrit meaning to English. However, since there is no equivalent word for mudra in English, this is probably the best name under the circumstances.

This mudra can be described as a combination of padm-asana, 'lotus pose', and paschimottanasana. It can therefore only be performed by people who can sit in padmasana.

Benefits

This asana gives the benefits enumerated in the general section with the following noteworthy characteristics.

Constipation, visceroptosis and sexual disorders: The upturned heels apply a particularly strong pressure on the abdominal organs. The organs receive an intense massage, especially during the execution of Alternative C, which accentuates the efficacy of this asana on the internal organs.

This asana notably relieves constipation and also visceroptosis. For these two ailments Alternatives B and C are recommended. In this context it should be remembered that these two disorders often occur side by side. Therefore by relieving constipation visceroptosis is simultaneously eased.

This asana also considerably reduces the blood flow to the legs and diverts a larger blood flow to the abdominal and especially the pelvic organs. This has the effect of further improving the functioning of these organs, over and above the beneficial effect of the massage that they receive, and further

actively helps in the rectification of any malfunctions. Many sexual disorders can be successfully treated by yoga mudra.

The legs: The legs are not stretched as with other forward bending poses, but the articulations of the ankle, knee and hip joints are considerably loosened. Regular practice of this asana will eventually and permanently loosen these joints and allow the practitioner to sit in padmasana during meditation for prolonged periods of time without uneasiness. Physical discomfort during meditation is probably the most serious obstacle in attaining good experiences in meditation.

Spiritual aspect

This asana has a powerful influence in awakening the kundalini. This is traditionally said to reside in mooladhara chakra in the pelvic region. It seems more than possible that the increased blood flow to this area as mentioned in the previous section gives a profound contribution to the unleashing of this psychic force. Yoga mudra also has a powerful influence on the manipura chakra, or psychic centre. This chakra is often associated with the solar plexus and is one of the centres of pranic energy.

Spiritual aspirants should stay in the final position, preferably doing Alternative A, since it is the most comfortable, for as long as is possible without discomfort.

Technique

There are three alternative methods of executing this asana, all starting in padmasana with the feet as high as possible on the thighs and the heels pressing into the abdomen.



Alternative A

Alternative A

Stage 1: Place the arms behind the back and grasp the wrist of one arm with the hand of the other arm. Breathe normally for a short time whilst consciously relaxing the whole body, especially the back.

Stage 2: Inhale deeply, and then whilst exhaling slowly bend the trunk forwards. At the end of the exhalation try to rest the forehead on the ground. If this is impossible, suspend it above but as near the ground as the individual is able. Breathe deeply and abdominally for a comfortable length of time. Practitioners who cannot touch the ground with their foreheads should then return to the starting position and repeat the same procedure a number of times. People who can touch the ground should proceed as follows: whilst exhaling, try to touch the chin on the floor and push it slightly away from the body. Immobilize the body and inhale. Whilst again exhaling, attempt to push the chin a little further away from the body. Immobilize the body and inhale. Repeat this procedure until the chin is as far away from the body as the suppleness of the back will allow.

This is the final position.

Relax the whole body and breathe deeply. After a comfortable period of time slowly return to the starting position. This alternative gives maximum elongation of the spine.

Alternative B

Stage 1: In the starting position clench the fists with thumbs outside fingers. Rest the left fist on the right upturned heel and the right fist on the left heel, the thumbs pointing forwards and downwards. Relax the entire body for a short time whilst breathing normally.

Stage 2: Perform the same activities that are described in Stage 2 of Alternative A.

This alternative method produces a powerful compression of the abdomen. It does not stretch the back as much as Alternative A.

Alternative C

Stage 1: Perform *buddha padmasana*, ‘locked lotus pose’.

Crossing the arms behind the back try to grasp the left big toe with the left hand and the right big toe with the right hand. This is easier to execute if the practitioner pushes the shoulder blades towards each other, then holds one of the big toes and then whilst exhaling deeply and leaning the trunk forwards attempts to grasp the other big toe.

Breathe normally and relax the whole body.

Stage 2: Execute the procedure described in Stage 2 of Alternative A.

This is the most difficult of the three alternatives. It particularly produces a good chest expansion, encouraging chest development. It also ensures that the heels are pressed firmly into the abdomen throughout the whole practice.

Notes

1. Do not unduly strain the legs and the back. Stop the forward bend if excessive pain is experienced.
2. Ensure that the respiration is coordinated with the physical movements and that during the final pose it is deep, slow and rhythmic.
3. Make sure that the heels, or the fists in Alternative B, press firmly into the abdomen. This will ensure maximum efficacy of the asana.

General considerations

These are the same as listed for *paschimottanasana*, except for the section entitled ‘General Considerations’.

Important recommendations

These are as given in the general section, and should be read carefully before attempting yoga mudra or any other asana described in this book.

Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas

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Health Benefits of Backward Bending Asanas is a booklet describing in depth performance and effects of nine asanas. This booklet was published in 1974 and was dedicated to Ma Dharmashakti, who “truly epitomizes the essence of yoga. May she continue to inspire others in the future as she has done in the past.”

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INTRODUCTION

The backward bending poses given in this book mainly affect the pelvic, abdominal and spinal regions, together with the associated organs, glands, muscles and nerves.

Forward bending poses affect essentially the same regions, though of course in a different sense. For example, during forward bending asanas the abdominal muscles are compressed, whereas during backward bending poses they are stretched; the vertebral column is bent forwards (in a way that it is used in everyday life), instead of being arched backwards during execution of the asanas given in this book. Though the physical position of the practitioner during performance of the backward bending asanas is different to forward bending asanas, the general influence on the organs, glands, and other body systems is very similar (though of course the intensity depends on the asana). For example, both types of asanas cause compression of the abdominal organs, which results in decongestion of blood. The general effect is improved suppleness, separation of neighbouring vertebrae and the release and stimulation of associated nerves. The general physiological influence on relevant regions of the body has been discussed in the book on forward bending asanas, and so to prevent repetition in this book a brief description of the health benefits is given in the sections on each individual backward bending asana.

The reader might, with justification, ask, "Is it, therefore, necessary to do both backward and forward bending asanas, since both act on the same parts of the body?" The answer is an emphatic "Yes" for various reasons. Firstly, the spine and the spinal nerves are bent in opposite directions, which is reason enough to do both types of asanas. Secondly, each type of asana differs in the extent of its influence on the parts of the body. For example, backward bending poses have a powerful affect on the kidneys. These are two of the most important organs in the body, since they purify the blood. Impure blood can give rise to many bodily disorders

and certainly lowers the general health of the body. The performances of both types of asanas, forward and backward bending, complement each other and when performed with other types of asanas give the best possible benefits.

Three of these asanas, bhujangasana, shalabhasana and dhanurasana, traditionally form a set. If practised consecutively during regular asana sessions, they contribute much in ensuring or promoting a healthy body. They influence all the main systems of the body: nervous, glandular, circulatory, respiratory, digestive and alimentary, and so may be regarded as almost a necessity in establishing or maintaining general health.

Spinal health

The importance of a supple spine cannot be over emphasized. Besides providing the support framework for the trunk and head, it also provides protection to the large number of nerves that are distributed to all parts of the body. There is much truth in the often quoted statement that “a healthy spine characterizes youthfulness of body and mind and a rigid spine old age and senility.”

The triple set of asanas, bhujangasana, shalabhasana and dhanurasana, influences the whole spine, rendering it supple and stimulating the associated nerves and providing a good blood supply to them.

Generally it can be said that:

- i) Bhujangasana affects the spine in the upper back and neck.
- ii) Shalabhasana affects the lower parts of the spine.
- iii) Dhanurasana affects the entire spine from top to bottom.

The spine will attain optimum condition if these three backward bending poses (or any other of this type) are supplemented by each of the following asanas:

- i) Paschimottanasana, pada hastasana and the asanas which bend the spine forwards, mainly in the lower region of the trunk.

- ii) Halasana, which bends the spine forwards chiefly in the upper region of the trunk and neck.
- iii) Matsyendrasana, which applies torsion to the spine (this asana is described at the end of this book).

General bodily health

The minimum quota of asanas that should be regularly practised to ensure a healthy body are the ones already mentioned, together with sirshasana, sarvangasana and surya namaskara (the latter is not an asana, but a dynamic exercise of ancient origin). Of course, the practice of other asanas are also immensely beneficial and those people who have time should certainly do them to obtain the best possible health of the body. However, for those people who consider themselves too busy and without much spare time in the whole day, at least the practice of this minimum number is highly recommended. These asanas can be completed within half an hour, with relaxation and without any haste. This allocation of time every day will be more than justified by a sharper mind and a far fitter body, more able to efficiently execute daily responsibilities.

ASANAS FOR THE BODY AND MIND

One of the fundamental beliefs of yoga is that disharmony of the mind is the prime cause of both mental and physical illness. How does the mind adversely affect the functioning of the body? The answer is complex, but basically it can be said that sustained psychological stress or disturbances over extended periods of time cause the functions of the body to operate at an abnormal level. Delicate systems of the body such as the nervous and endocrinal system are designed and fully capable of elevated usage for short periods of time to allow the human organism to give bursts of intense physical or mental activity when required. However, prolonged functioning at this level eventually causes the systems themselves, or the organs that they activate, to malfunction. This is essentially the same process in a car if it is driven at full speed for a long time; the car wears more quickly and is more liable to break down. It is also believed that a disturbed mind renders muscular activity less efficient. Thus to carry out its normal functions, it must work harder to overcome this inefficiency. This consequently requires the respiratory and circulatory systems, among others, to work harder to provide the muscles with larger amounts of nourishment to operate in the normal way. In this way, organs associated with these systems (lungs, heart, etc.) are more likely to fail or become incapable of performing their normal duties efficiently.

“Yes,” some people will say, “this is no doubt the cause of organic illnesses, but what about illnesses caused by germs and viruses.” Yoga fully accepts that many diseases are caused by germs, but points out that germs can only successfully invade and cause damage in a body that is physically and mentally weak. A strong, healthy mind and body has very effective auto-curative powers, which can neutralize any tendency of germs to cause disease. A disturbed mind reduces the auto-therapeutic capabilities of the human organism and more easily allows the onset of disease.

At this stage, it is worth noting that current medical science attempts to cure bodily ailments by directing attention to the organ, gland or area, which manifests the ailment. This, of course, has a reasonably large amount of success, even if sometimes temporary, and has helped numerous people to live a more happy life. However, the surgical operation on parts of the body or the administration of drugs can have repercussions on other parts of the body, so that removal of one malady is only replaced by another or others. This approach, though undoubtedly necessary in many cases, does not delve into the root of the problem, which again lies in the mind. An increasing number of medical practitioners are accepting that the basic cause of illness originates in the mind and advise patients to attend yoga classes. Most, however, whilst acknowledging the influence of the mind, feel its complexity precludes any approach to curing illnesses from this direction and they continue to practise standard and accepted medical procedures (the exception, of course, is the psychiatrist, but he really only deals with people who have 'obvious' mental disorders).

So how does yoga and asanas help to tackle illness? First, yoga insists on the interaction between mind and body and states that any cure must improve the functioning of both simultaneously. The practice of asanas, when performed correctly, brings about tranquillity of the mind and the removal of stress and anxiety. This allows the functions of the body to return to their normal pattern of activity without the interference of the higher regions of the mind. At the same time, asanas influence the organs, glands, nerves, muscles etc., of the body and improve their physical condition and functional efficiency (this is explained in more detail in the discussion of the beneficial effects of the individual asanas). The overall result of regular performance of asanas is harmony between the mind and body, a consequent improvement in general health and a positive relief or removal of illnesses.

Asanas, practised in conjunction with other techniques of yoga, can produce an even more efficacious influence on the mind and body. Meditation, for example, not only powerfully removes mental disturbances (both recent and those originating in childhood) to assist in attaining good health, but creates a positive attitude to life, which can prevent the occurrence of mental disorders. In this way, the ability of the individual to face life under all circumstances, with reduced psychological repercussions such as stress and neurosis is fortified. The other yoga techniques even further improve an individual's health.

IMPORTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations should be read carefully and carried out by the practitioners of asanas.

Concentration

Try not to let the mind think of things other than the regions of the body that are suggested for each asana. When the mind is concentrated on a particular part of the body the following advantages result:

- The mind is prevented from wandering and worrying and so helps to reduce tension, and replacing it with relative tranquillity.
- Vital energy is directed to that part of the body and consequently improves the influence of the asana.

Restricted times of practice

Do not do asanas for at least three hours after food or half an hour after vigorous physical exercise. Generally the asanas given in this book powerfully increase the vitality and energy of the practitioner. They should therefore not be practised before going to bed.

Premature termination

If any extreme pain is experienced in the body (apart from the slight pain due to stretching of muscles) the asana should be terminated immediately and, if necessary, expert advice sought.

Duration

The decision regarding the actual duration of each asana has been left to the discretion of the practitioner. All that is specified is that the individual should feel reasonably comfortable throughout the duration. Those asanas which are suitable and which are practised specifically for spiritual purposes should be maintained for an extended duration if the practitioner is able.

Expenditure of energy

Remember, the asanas given in this book are not intended to develop muscles, but to produce maximum functional efficiency of the entire body. They should not require a large expenditure of energy in their execution but should be performed with as much relaxation as possible.

Asana program

People who want to maintain a healthy body should practise a selection of asanas from the classifications given in the introduction. People who have specific ailments are also recommended to do a selection of these asanas, together with asanas which have notable benefits for their particular illness. The asanas are most beneficial if performed at a regular time.

Synchronization of breath

The coordination between respiration and the physical activities of the asana, together with respiration in the final pose have been emphasized for each asana. The practitioner should make certain that the respiration is as prescribed. Asanas performed without the correct breathing lose much of their effectiveness, since the coordination ensures:

- the position of the body is compatible with the respiration (for example, breathing normally whilst in the final position of shalabhasana would be both difficult and uncomfortable).
- a good supply of oxygen is transferred to the cells of the body.
- ease in executing the asana.
- the best possible massage of the relevant organs takes place.

Ensure that the respiration is through the nose. If necessary, thoroughly clean the nasal passages before starting your asana programme.

Asanas

BHUJANGASANA (cobra pose)

In Sanskrit *bhujanga* means ‘cobra’ or ‘serpent’. The usual English translation is ‘cobra pose’. This asana is so called because in the final position it resembles a cobra, the raised trunk, neck and head representing the hood.

Historical information

The ancient treatise on hatha yoga, *Gheranda Samhita* (2:42–43), gives the following details:

Rest your body from the toes to the navel region on the ground. Place your palms on the ground and raise your head upwards like the head of a snake. This asana stimulates the digestive fire and eliminates all types of diseases. By the practice of bhujangasana, kundalini is awakened.

Though not giving details, this description shows that the ancient sages knew that this asana has a powerful influence on the body.

Health benefits

The spinal nerves may be classified as follows:

- i) The spinal cord and the thirty-one pairs of nerves that emerge from the spaces between adjoining vertebra

together with the associated nerve centres surrounding the spine, which influence activities throughout the entire body.

- ii) The two sympathetic nerve ganglia which are embedded in the spinal musculature on either side of the spine.
- iii) The parasympathetic outflows which arise in the region of the neck and pelvis (the pelvic nerves emerge from the lower spine).

It should be mentioned that the latter two systems comprise the autonomic nervous system, both of which jointly control the involuntary functions of the body such as respiration, elimination, circulation and digestion. A balance between these two antagonistic systems ensures smooth operation of these functions.

The exaggerated arching of the back notably stretches and stimulates all these nerves, though to a lesser degree the parasympathetic nerves emerging in the pelvic region. Further more, the blood flow in the region of the back is characteristically slow. This asana squeezes stagnant or sluggish blood from this area and encourages a more abundant blood flow to the spinal nerves (as well as the muscles, organs, etc.). The overall result is the general improvement in the condition of these nerves and consequent promotion of the efficient functioning of the various parts of the body that they innervate. In this way, the individual's health is improved by doing bhujangasana.

The vertebral column and associated problems:

Bhujangasana imparts a progressive bend to the spine starting in the region of the neck (cervical vertebrae) and proceeding vertebrae towards the region of the loins (lumbar vertebrae). In this way, it loosens the articulations between the vertebrae and also relaxes the back muscles. Regular practice of this asana will make even the most rigid spine flexible.

Remember that a supple spine is essential for good health, vitality and youthfulness, and so a few minutes of daily practice can be more than justified. The following are

a few of the disorders of the back that can be beneficially treated by bhujangasana:

Backache: This is a problem that affects a large number of people, especially those who lead sedentary lives and who sit or stand in one position for prolonged periods of time. This asana, if practised regularly, can remove even the most painful types of backache. In fact, many chronic sufferers of backache have praised bhujangasana as being the panacea. It acts on the chief causes of backache; it removes mental tension, releases any compression of the spinal and related nerves, removes general fatigue and helps to relax tense muscles. This asana is also useful for the treatment of lumbago (refer to the later subsection entitled 'Rheumatism').

Spinal deformities: The progressive curving of the spine during bhujangasana is very useful in correcting minor displacement of vertebrae or in rectifying any incorrect curvature of the spine. In this way, it can remove round shoulders, hunched back and general spinal deformities.

Slipped disc: It can be beneficially practised for the relief of slipped disc, but the utmost care must be taken and preferably personal instructions obtained from a yoga teacher.

The abdomen: During the practice of bhujangasana, the abdominal muscles are stretched more than normal and are strengthened. The stretched muscles and the pressure exerted between the floor and the abdominal wall has the effect of reducing the volume of the abdominal cavity and hence increasing the intra-abdominal pressure. This favourably massages the internal organs (such as liver, intestines, kidneys, pancreas) and helps to remove sluggish blood. This influence, together with the stimulation of the nerves innervating the abdominal organs (described in the previous section) brings about a noticeable improvement in their functioning. Consequently many abdominal ailments can be eliminated or eased and the digestive processes made more efficient.

Constipation: The increased pressure in the abdomen during the practice of this asana is invaluable in promoting the movement of faecal matter towards the anus. The nerves associated with the defecation are also stimulated and so this asana, like many other asanas, is very useful for removing constipation. For the same reasons, flatulence can be effectively eliminated.

Indigestion: By gently massaging the digestive organs and influencing the associated nerves, the appropriate quantities of gastric juices are encouraged to enter the stomach and intestines. Thus, bhujangasana is useful in eliminating indigestion.

Lack of vitality and anxiety: In the region of the navel are a group of nerve centres, known collectively as the solar plexus. Physiologically, these nerves are regarded as part of the sympathetic nervous system and partly control the activities of the abdominal organs. Traditionally, in both the East and West, the solar plexus is also associated with states of anxiety and stress. This belief, in fact, is more than hearsay, for the action of the sympathetic nervous system duplicates and is directly connected with the suprarenal endocrinal glands located above each kidney. These glands secrete the hormone adrenalin into the blood, which creates stress in the body (such as an increase of blood pressure and heart rate), in order that the body can face emergencies more effectively. Why have two duplicate systems? The nervous system produces almost instantaneous reactions in the body, so that the individual can face danger and emergencies immediately. However, when the person needs to be prepared for an adverse situation, or needs extra vitality for prolonged periods of time, the endocrinal system takes over from the nervous system (this being more permanent and less energy consuming).

In regularized quantities, adrenalin gives the individual more vitality, yet without excessive and prolonged stress. Many people are either periodically over-stressed or lack vitality. Since this bhujangasana influences both the solar

plexus and the suprarenal glands, it can normalize their activities and replace abnormal stress or tension with relative tranquillity, and lethargy with zest. At the same time, it can improve the digestive functions which are influenced by the solar plexus and further supplement the other benefits of this asana on the digestive processes.

Genito-urinary disorders: Bhujangasana stimulates the nerves which control the sexual organs, and so is useful for curing various types of sexual ailments such as painful menstruation or menopause, leucorrhoea and sterility. For further details refer to the subsection entitled 'The parasympathetic nervous system' in the section on shalabhasana.

Obesity and cellulites: The build-up of fat in various parts of the body is caused by a multiple number of factors (apart from overeating), including sustained stress, bad blood circulation, respiration and digestion. Bhujangasana improves the offending functions by acting directly on the organs involved, stimulating the innervating nerves and removing the stress. In this way, regular practice of bhujangasana can effectively remove fatty deposits.

Rheumatism: This ailment is caused by the formation of excessive fibres of the protein collagen in the joints. The hormone cortisone, which is secreted by the suprarenal glands, inhibits this formation. Bhujangasana, as has already been explained, influences the operation of these glands by decongesting and massaging them. In this way, the suprarenal glands can be encouraged to secrete cortisone in sufficient quantities to relieve the painful ailment of rheumatism.

Diabetes: The superficial cause of diabetes is the insufficient secretion of the hormone insulin from the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas. The reason for the inadequate supply of insulin is generally regarded as being caused by sustained stress and overeating, especially rich food, the latter probably being a compensatory reaction to chronic stress. Though not definite, it is believed that the stress causes malfunctioning of the pituitary gland

(the controller of the endocrinal system, including the islets of Langerhans) and the excessive consumption of food overworks the pancreas by requiring it to produce abnormally large amounts of insulin.

Technique

There are a number of alternative methods of executing bhujangasana, each of which is designed to bring about a lesser or greater flexion of the back. The variations are given here in order of difficulty, the easiest first. Beginners are advised to start by doing the first version and after mastering it, attempt the second version.

Warning: The practitioner must be cautious in the practice of bhujangasana ensuring:

- i) The spine is slowly and smoothly bent. This prevents injury to the vertebral column.
- ii) The spine is only raised as far as comfortable; no strain should be used. After regular practice the spine will progressively become more supple.

Method I – for beginners (the sphinx pose)

Stage 1: Lie flat on the floor, chest facing downwards and legs straight, with the soles facing upwards.

Rest the forehead on the ground.

Place both forearms flat on the ground, so that they are parallel with the body and with each other.

The palms should be in contact with the ground on either side of the forehead.

Close the eyes and relax the whole body, particularly the back.

Stage 2: During inhalation slowly and progressively bend the head backwards and then curve the back so that the head moves further upwards and backwards.

Initially try to raise the head and trunk without the assistance of the arms, using only the back muscles.

When it becomes impossible to raise the trunk and head further, the arms should be used in coordination with the

arching of the back to support the weight of the upper part of the body. The practitioner should endeavour to bend the spine starting from the neck and work towards the lower back.

In fact, the practitioner should concentrate on trying to feel each individual vertebra, bend in turn and feel the pressure in the vertebral column proceed step by step from the neck to the lower back. The back muscles must be relaxed as much as possible during the raising of the trunk with the arms.

The upward movement should be preferably completed during one slow inhalation.

Stage 3: The final position is reached when the back starts to strain or when the upper arms are vertical. The forearms should remain flat on the ground throughout the practice of the asana.

Maintain the final position for a comfortable length of time, breathing normally, whilst trying to relax the whole body. Then whilst exhaling, slowly return to the starting position.

The asana can be repeated as many times as the practitioner wishes.



Method 1 Stage 3

Method 2

This is the most commonly practised form of bhujangasana.

Stage 1: This is the same as Stage 1 in Method 1, but the hands are placed beside the shoulders.

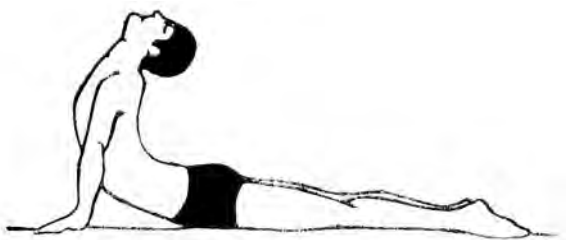
The palms should be in contact with the ground, the fingers in line with the whole body and pointing forwards.

Stage 2: This is the same as Stage 2 in Method 1.

Stage 3: The final position is attained when the back will not curve further without strain or when the arms are straight. The lower abdomen, below the navel, should be in contact with the ground throughout the execution of the asana.

In the final position, breathe slowly and rhythmically. With exhalation try to bend the back further in the abdominal region (without raising the abdomen off the ground). With inhalation try to raise the trunk higher from the floor. This can, with practice, appreciably accentuate the curvature of the back.

When the back will arch no further, retain the breath for a short time and slowly return to the starting position, whilst exhaling. The asana should be preferably repeated at least three times.



Method 2 Stage 3

Method 3

This is a more difficult variation of Method 2, the only difference being the position of the hands and arms.

The method of execution is the same as Method 2, but more effort is required.

In the starting position the hands should be placed beside the lower ribs, fingers pointing forwards. The forearms should be vertical.

Poorna Bhujangasana (full cobra pose)

This variation of bhujangasana should only be practised by people with very supple backs, or by children.

Assume bhujangasana, as described in Method 2.

Instead of keeping the legs straight, bend them at the

knees and try to touch the back of the head with the toes. Remain in the final pose for a comfortable length of time and then return to the starting position.

Breath: Inhale while assuming bhujangasana.

Exhale whilst pushing the feet towards the head.

Breathe normally in the final pose.

Inhale whilst returning to bhujangasana.

Exhale while returning to the prone position.

Breathe normally on the floor.



Benefits: As given for bhujangasana but to a greater degree of intensity.

Duration: Try to maintain the final pose for a minute or so. Repeat the asana up to five times.

Points to note whilst performing the asana

1. Ensure coordination between the physical movements and respiration as described. This ensures optimum efficacy of the asana.
2. Concentration should be directed to the respiration, the relaxation of the body, particularly the back (except of course during the initial raising of the trunk), or the progressive bending of the spine.
3. Bring the shoulder blades as close to each other as possible during elevation and in the final stage. This increases the removal of stagnant or sluggish blood in this region of the back.
4. The practitioner should immediately stop flexion of the spine if any undue strain is experienced.

People advised not to practise bhujangasana

Sufferers from:

- Peptic ulcers
- Hernia
- Intestinal tuberculosis
- Hyperthyroidism

and pregnant women.

SARPASANA (snake pose)

The Sanskrit word *sarpa* means ‘snake’ and the English translation is given as the ‘snake pose’. This asana is very similar to the first stage of raising the trunk in bhujangasana – namely with the contraction on the back muscles and relaxation of the arms. In sarpasana, however, a deep inhalation is taken before raising the trunk, instead of the inhalation being synchronized with the raising of the trunk, as in bhujangasana.

Health benefits

The beneficial effects of doing this asana are similar to bhujangasana (refer to the previous section for details); the abdomen and spine are influenced in the same way except that the vertebral column is not curved backwards as much as it is during bhujangasana. It is particularly useful for maintaining or producing strong and healthy back muscles.

The lungs: Sarpasana has a notable influence on the lungs. The two lungs are composed of millions of alveoli, air cells, which facilitate the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide. If these tiny air cells remain active and the lungs elastic, then the lungs retain their general health and efficiency. The natural way of maintaining a healthy pair of lungs is regular, deep respirations. This successively inflates and deflates the tiny alveoli, and at the same time stretches the elastic tissue of the lungs. Many people, however, do not breathe as they should and do not use anywhere near the maximum usable capacity of the lungs. The alveoli consequently become unhealthy by inactivity or underactivity.

Sarpasana (and shalabhasana, which will be discussed subsequently) is an invaluable asana to rectify this situation. In the final position of the asana, the breath is retained and a large proportion of the weight of the body is supported on the abdomen. This raises the intra-abdominal pressure, pushes the diaphragm towards the lungs and causes pressurization of the air in the lungs. This helps to uncrumple or open out inactive alveoli allowing them to resume their normal duties. The effective surface area of exchange in the lungs is increased, and so the removal of carbon dioxide and the supply of oxygen to all parts of the body are vastly improved.

Sarpasana also imposes a powerful stretch on the lungs which ensures their elasticity. This alone does much to improve the working efficiency of the respiratory system.

The heart: The constantly working heart also benefits from this asana. The increase of the pressure within the chest cavity also massages the heart. This usefully tones this organ and strengthens the associated muscles. The general blood circulation of the body can be consequently improved which has repercussions on the general health of the individual (bad blood circulation contributing to the onset of many diseases).

Technique

Stage 1: Lie flat on the floor, the abdomen and chest facing the floor.

The forehead should rest on the ground and the hands clasped or folded behind the back.

The legs should be straight and together, with the soles upwards. Relax the whole body and breathe normally.

Stage 2: Inhale as deeply as possible, moving the ribs towards the neck (clavicular respiration) and towards the floor (intercostal respiration), and expanding the abdominal wall towards the floor (abdominal or diaphragmatic respiration).

In the same way as the initial stage of bhujangasana, slowly bend the head backwards and then the trunk upwards as high as possible using only the back muscles.

Ensure that most of the weight of the body is supported on the abdomen. The feet should not leave the floor. Remain in the final position for a comfortable length of time still holding the breath in then, whilst exhaling, slowly return to the starting position.

If necessary, relax on the floor, allowing the respiration to return to normal.

Then inhale deeply again and repeat the procedure.

The efficacy of this asana, especially with regard to the action on the lungs and heart, markedly increases with the number of times it is executed.

Therefore, it should be repeated as many times as the practitioner's asana timetable will permit.

At the least sign of strain, however, the practice of this asana should be immediately terminated.



Stage 2

A more difficult variation

This is similar to the traditional method except that the thumbs are interlocked and the arms held straight on each side of the head in line with the body.

The arms and hands are raised as much as is possible in the final position.

This alternative method further intensifies the intra-abdominal pressure and hence the pressure of the air in the lungs.

Points to remember whilst executing the asana

1. Ensure that the maximum amount of air is inspired (without excessive strain) and maintained in the lungs

during the raising of the trunk and in the final static position.

2. Concentration should be directed towards the abdomen in the final position and on the respiration in the starting position.

People who are advised not to perform sarpasana

These are the same as for bhujangasana, together with people who have weak hearts or high blood pressure.

Important recommendations

These are as given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

SHALABHASANA (locust pose)

The Sanskrit word *shalabha* means 'locust' and therefore the English name of this asana is usually given as the 'locust pose'. It is also sometimes known as the 'grasshopper pose'. The asana is so called because, in its final position, it resembles a locust with its raised tail.

This asana complements bhujangasana and so, to obtain the optimum benefits, they should be performed consecutively.

Health benefits

Shalabhasana acts powerfully on the body giving the following benefits:

- It can remove backache and spinal deformities and generally ensures and promotes flexibility of the back muscles and vertebral column. It also effectively strengthens the back muscles and so helps to prevent the occurrence of back ailments (many prevalent back problems such as slipped disc are partly caused by weak musculature due to lack of exercise and habitual bad sitting and standing positions).
- It stimulates the spinal nerves and so beneficially improves the numerous functions of the body that they innervate.

The asana is notably useful in relieving sciatica, by simultaneously stretching the sciatic nerves and separating the offending, adjoining vertebra in the lower spine, which tend to squash these nerves and cause pain.

- It increases the pressure in the abdomen and therefore massages the internal organs. In this way, this asana produces general normality of their important functions, improves digestion, helps to remove constipation, eliminates anxiety and promotes vitality (by its normalizing action on the solar plexus and suprarenal glands).

These benefits have been discussed more fully in the section on bhujangasana.

Shalabhasana also has a distinctive influence on the following regions of the body:

The lungs: As with sarpasana, air is retained in the lungs during execution of the asana. This increases the pressure in the lungs, uncrumples inactive alveoli and in turn improves the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. In general the asana makes the lungs more efficient, which in turn improves the functioning of the entire body.

The heart: The heart is also beneficially influenced by shalabhasana. For further details see the section on sarpasana.

The parasympathetic nervous system: Besides influencing the sympathetic nervous system (refer to the section on bhujangasana), shalabhasana produces a notable influence on the parasympathetic nerves (both of these systems being antagonistic parts of the autonomic nervous system).

The parasympathetic nerves are classified into two groups:

- i) The cranial outflow which originates directly from the brain and innervates numerous functions of the body, including the heart, lungs, and eyes.
- ii) The pelvic outflow which emerges from the lower part of the spinal cord and innervates the abdominal and pelvic organs.

Shalabhasana influences both of these outflows by contracting the pelvic region and improving the blood flow

to the nerves, and simultaneously stretching the nerves in the neck region. This produces a consequent improvement in the functioning of the organs that they control. In this way (and by the improved blood circulation in the abdominal and pelvic organs and glands) the following disorders can be relieved or rectified:

- **General abdominal problems:** This includes indigestion, intestinal disorders, kidney and stomach problems. The removal of these problems is simultaneously assisted by the massage that the internal organs directly receive during shalabhasana.
- **General genitor-urinary problems:** This includes painful or irregular menstruation, menopausal and uterine disorders and sterility in women. It rectifies malfunctioning of the prostate gland (which provides the lubricating fluid during ejaculation) and the bladder in men.

The sexual glands: Besides the action of the asana directly on the sexual organs and associated nerves, the sexual glands (the ovaries in women and testes in men) which control sexual activity are also powerfully influenced by shalabhasana. This further improves the efficiency of the sexual organs and helps to remove related ailments.

A further noteworthy fact is that normal functioning sexual glands are also associated with youthfulness and general good mental and physical health. Thus shalabhasana in no small way helps to maintain these attributes in the individual.

Spiritual benefits

This asana is traditionally regarded as being useful for awakening consciousness. If there is a physiological counterpart to psychic centres (and this is a controversial topic), shalabhasana possibly produces this spiritual awakening in two ways:

- i) By stimulation of the 'filum terminale'. This is the fine, thread-like fibrous nerve which extends within the spinal

cord from the region of the loins to the base of the spine, the coccyx, to which it is anchored. This nerve is certainly stimulated during shalabhasana and could be a part of the body which unleashes the psychic force. Its physiological purpose is not really understood; it is possible that its prime purpose is to act as a physical 'switch' which releases psychic energy. Alternatively, the stimulation of the pelvic parasympathetic nerves could be the 'switch' for awakening.

- ii) By influencing the activity of the gonads or sexual glands. The sublimation of sexual energy is often quoted with regard to spirituality. In this context, the psychic awakening may be due to the influence of shalabhasana on the gonads.

Technique

Stage I: Lie flat on the ground, facing downwards.

The legs should be straight and together, the soles facing upwards. Throughout the execution of the asana, the shoulders should be kept in contact with the ground (or as near to it as possible). This is sometimes difficult for beginners, but is necessary to obtain maximum benefits from the asana.

The neck should be stretched as much as possible with the chin pointing forwards and resting on the ground. This position also should be maintained throughout the practice of the asana to fully stretch the nerves in the neck (particularly the parasympathetic nerves).

The arms are positioned in line with the body, either on each side of the body or with the hands under the thighs. The hands can either be:

- i) Flat with the palms upwards.
- ii) Flat with the palms downwards.
- iii) Clenched with the knuckles upwards or downwards.

The practitioner can choose any one of these combinations.

Stage 2: Relax the whole body and then inhale deeply. On completion of the inhalation, raise both legs (keeping them straight and together) as high as possible without undue strain.

This movement requires a powerful contraction of the muscles of the lower back and the application of pressure between the arms and hands and the floor.

Maintain the final position and relax the entire body.

When the breathing has returned to normal repeat the process. The asana can be repeated as many times as the practitioner requires, though a minimum of three times is recommended.



Points to remember whilst executing the asana

1. Ensure that the chin and shoulders remain on the ground.
2. As the practitioner's back muscles become stronger, the raising and maintaining of the legs in the elevated position should be further extended by contraction of the back muscles and the assistance of the arms being progressively reduced. When the practitioner becomes sufficiently proficient, the arms should remain totally relaxed during the asana. This ensures optimum removal of sluggish blood in the lower back and its subsequent replacement with purified blood, and full exercise and stretching of the muscles and nerves of the lower back.
3. Try to keep the legs as straight as possible throughout the execution of the asana.
4. Do not use excessive strain during performance of the asana.

5. Ensure that inhalation in the starting position is as deep as possible. This is necessary for optimum influence on the lungs.
6. Concentration should be directed to the back muscles.
7. Try to ensure that the maximum weight of the body is sustained by the abdomen.

Variations

1. For beginners – Ardha Shalabhasana (half locust pose)

This variation gives the same benefits as shalabhasana but at a reduced level. It is however considerably easier to do.

Stage 1: This is described in Stage 1 for shalabhasana.

Stage 2: Inhale and raise the left leg as high as possible, keeping it straight.

The other leg should remain relaxed, straight and flat on the floor. It should not be used to raise the other leg.

The left leg is raised and maintained in the final position by using only the back muscles and the arms.

The final position is maintained for a comfortable length of time after which the leg is slowly lowered to the ground. The same procedure is repeated with the right leg.

Note: It is recommended that the left leg is raised first so that the intra-abdominal pressure is firstly applied in the right side of the abdomen and in particular on the ascending colon. This makes sure that the pressure acts in accordance with the action of the intestinal peristalsis (faecal matter passing first through the ascending colon and then the descending colon to the anus) and so helps to remove constipation.



Ardha Shalabhasana

2. For adepts – Poorna Shalabhasana (full locust pose)

This variation is executed in the same way as shalabhasana. However, the practitioner should endeavour to raise the thighs, head and chest off the ground and stretch the neck as much as possible. The abdomen should sustain the weight of the entire body and the arms should be straight, but should preferably not assist in the raising or support of the body.

This variation further stretches the nerves in the neck and so increases their stimulation.

This is the most difficult form of shalabhasana and should be only attempted by people who have a very supple back.

Technique

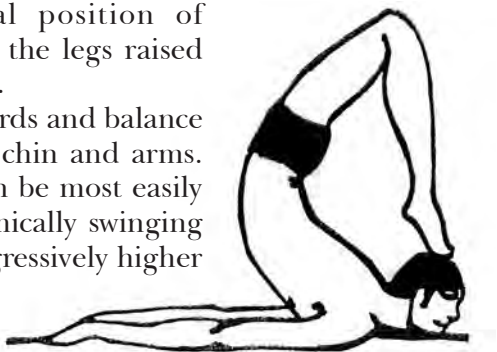
Assume the final position of shalabhasana with the legs raised as high as possible.

Jerk the legs upwards and balance on the shoulders, chin and arms.

This final pose can be most easily attained by rhythmically swinging the legs up to progressively higher levels until the balance point is reached.

Try to touch the top of the head with the feet.

Maintain the final pose for a comfortable length of time whilst breathing slowly.



Benefits

Benefits are the same as for shalabhasana, but with the added advantages of inverting the body. This influences the brain, facial organs and the whole endocrinal system of the body.

People who are advised not to do shalabhasana or its variations

These are as given for bhujangasana, together with those people with weak hearts or high blood pressure.

DHANURASANA (bow pose)

The word *dhanur* comes from Sanskrit and means 'a bow'. Therefore this asana is logically called the 'bow pose' in English. In its final position the asana resembles a bow; the trunk and upper legs representing the bow and the arms and lower legs the bowstring.

It combines the benefits of both bhujangasana and shalabhasana. Therefore, though it is preferable to perform all three asanas for optimum results, practitioners who have insufficient time during each day should do only dhanurasana in their asana program for reasonable maintenance of bodily health.

Health benefits

Since it combines both bhujangasana and shalabhasana, it gives the general benefits of both of these asanas. Therefore, refer to the sections on these two asanas for details of the advantages of doing dhanurasana.

Its main differences to bhujangasana and shalabhasana are:

The abdomen: i) The abdominal muscles are stretched more, due to the accentuated curvature of both the trunk and the thighs, and ii) the whole weight of the body rests on the abdomen and so the intra-abdominal pressure is increased, and the massage of the abdominal organs is more effective. These influences on the abdomen make this asana most powerful in rectifying abdominal disorders or generally maintaining the organs in good health, especially if deep and rhythmic breathing is done in the final position.

Spinal cord and legs: If performed correctly, the final position is attained only by contraction of the leg muscles, the arms acting as braces. Thus the back muscles should not be used as they are in shalabhasana and the initial stage of bhujangasana. The passivity of the back muscles makes the spine and back supple. The powerful contraction of the legs makes them strong and healthy.

Nervous system: A notable advantage of dhanurasana is that it simultaneously influences both parts of the autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic and parasympathetic (refer to sections on bhujangasana and shalabhasana for details). Dhanurasana brings about equilibrium between these two antagonistic systems, and so improves the internal functions of digestion, reproduction and elimination.

The sexual and eliminative organs: Dhanurasana affects these organs, but to a lesser degree than shalabhasana. For details refer to the subsections entitled ‘The parasympathetic nervous system’ and ‘The sexual glands’ in the section on shalabhasana.

Dhanurasana also beneficially and notably influences the following functions, organs and illnesses of the body.

Blood purification: Excessively impure blood can give rise to many disorders of the body and general bad health. Dhanurasana can profoundly improve the efficiency of the kidneys and so allow them to purify the blood more effectively.

Obesity and cellulite: Dhanurasana is a very useful asana for removing unwanted fat. For details refer to the section on bhujangasana.

Rheumatism: This widespread and most painful ailment can be relieved by the practice of dhanurasana. For full details refer to the section on the ‘Health benefits’ of bhujangasana.

Diabetes: Dhanurasana is a useful asana for alleviating or even removing diabetes. For details refer to the section on bhujangasana.

The lungs and the heart: These all-important and over-worked organs are influenced by dhanurasana due to the high intra-abdominal pressure being transmitted to the thoracic cavity (rib cage) above the diaphragm, and to the retention or accentuated deep breathing in the final position. For further details turn to the section on sarpasana.

The solar plexus and suprarenal glands: Dhanurasana considerably massages and decongests the solar plexus

and suprarenal glands. In this way, it can profoundly and almost immediately produce a state of tranquillity, but coupled with vitality, which the practitioner can noticeably experience. It can also improve the digestive functions, which are partly controlled by the solar plexus (it being part of the sympathetic nervous system). For more details turn to the subsection entitled 'Lack of vitality and anxiety' in the section describing the benefits of bhujangasana.

Technique

Stage 1: Lie flat on the floor, facing downwards.

The arms should be placed on either side of the body and the chin or either side of the face, resting on the floor.

Bend the legs at the knees and hold the ankles with the hands, keeping the ankles together, but the knees apart.

Relax the whole body for a short time, breathing normally.

Stage 2: By trying to straighten both legs (which of course is impossible due to the restriction imposed by the arms) raise the chest, head and knees off the floor.

The only muscular contraction should be in the legs and hands; the rest of the body should be as relaxed as possible.

The back muscles should preferably not be used to raise the body off the floor.

In the final position, the weight of the body should rest on the abdomen, not the pelvic bones.

To ensure this position, the practitioner, whilst raising the knees as high as he is able to, can if necessary adjust the height of the head and chest above the ground.

The practitioner should find the most suitable position to maintain the soft part of the abdomen in contact with the ground (this being important for the massage of the internal organs). The chin should protrude as far as possible to give maximum bend to the neck (and consequently stimulate the nerves of the neck and arch the cervical vertebrae).

In the final position the practitioner can, if he wants and is able to, bring the knees together (still keeping the ankles in contact with each other).

In the raised position, the respiration can be either slow, rhythmic (accentuating the expansion and contraction of the abdomen) or can be retained after deep inhalation. No matter which method is adopted the prime aim is to obtain maximum massage of the internal organs.

Remain in the final pose for a comfortable length of time and then return to the ground by gradually relaxing the leg muscles. When the respiration has returned to normal the asana can be repeated.



Dhanurasana

The asana can be performed as many times as the available time will permit, providing undue fatigue does not occur. However, a minimum of three executions is recommended.

Accentuation of the action on the abdominal organs may be obtained by rocking backwards and forwards in the final position.

Points to note whilst doing the asana

1. Ensure that the back muscles are as relaxed as possible throughout the performance of the asana. Ideally the only muscular activity should be in the legs and hands (not the arms).
2. Make sure that the ankles remain together.
3. The practitioner should adjust the body position in the final pose to ensure that the soft part of the abdomen (belly) bears the weight of the body.
4. The asana should be executed without strain or sudden jerks and should not be performed if and when one becomes physically tired.

5. Concentration should be directed towards the back, abdomen or the respiration.
6. It is essential that the respiration is as suggested in the description of the technique to obtain maximum advantage from doing this asana.

Alternative variations

1. For beginners – Saral Dhanurasana (simple bow pose)

The following asana gives all the benefits of dhanurasana, but at a reduced level. It is ideal for beginners, who find dhanurasana too difficult, since it slowly develops the body in preparation for dhanurasana, whilst at the same time giving useful benefits.

Stage 1: This is as given for Stage 1 of dhanurasana, except that both knees and ankles must be together.

Stage 2: Raise the chest and head as high above the ground as possible by powerfully pushing the feet backwards.

The knees should remain on or as near the ground as possible. The legs should remain together.

The only muscular effort should be in the legs and hands keeping the rest of the body, including the back, relaxed.

Respiration should be as given for dhanurasana.

Maintain the final pose for a comfortable length of time and then return to the starting position.

Allow the breath to achieve normality and then repeat the asana. The asana can be repeated as many times as the practitioner is able to without experiencing discomfort or fatigue.



Saral Dhanurasana

2. For adepts – Poorna Dhanurasana (full bow pose)

This is the most difficult form of dhanurasana and should be practised only by people who have supple backs and who can do dhanurasana without the slightest problem.

Stage I: Lie flat on the stomach.

Bend the legs at the knees and hold the feet with the hands. The hands should hold the feet and the thumbs held in contact with the soles. The ankles should not be held as in dhanurasana. Relax the whole body for a short time breathing normally. Inhale and then raise the legs, thighs, chest and head as high as possible.

The arms should be used to pull the feet as high as the flexibility of the back will allow. Try to raise the arms to the side and then above the shoulders.

Breathe as deeply as possible in the final pose. Maintain the final position for a comfortable length of time and then slowly return to the starting position.



Note: Do not repeat the asana until respiration has returned to normal.

Benefits: The same as dhanurasana, but to a greater intensity.

Precautions: Do not practise before retiring to bed as it induces dynamism in the practitioner and will prevent sleep.

Duration: Remain in the final pose for as long as possible without strain. If the practitioner has sufficient energy it can be repeated for a second or third time.

People who are advised not to attempt dhanurasana or its variations

These are the same as for bhujangasana, together with people who have weak hearts, high blood pressure and abdominal ailments such as appendicitis and colitis.

Important recommendations

General advice to be followed when doing this asana is given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section.

USHTRASANA (camel pose)

The Sanskrit word *ushtra* means 'camel' and so this pose is known as the 'camel pose'.

It can be done as an alternative to dhanurasana with essentially the same benefits. This asana is particularly useful for those people who cannot support the weight of the body on the abdomen as in dhanurasana due to colitis or appendicitis.

Benefits

This asana is similar to dhanurasana, in fact, it can almost be described as a vertical version of dhanurasana. It is therefore not surprising that the benefits that each gives are nearly identical.

In ushtrasana the abdomen does not sustain the weight of the body and so the internal organs and the solar plexus are not pressed and massaged as effectively. However, ushtrasana surpasses dhanurasana in the amount that the spine is bent backwards. This is due to the fact that in ushtrasana the backward bending is assisted by gravity, whereas with dhanurasana the flexion has to be achieved upwards and against the force of gravity. Consequently, the benefits on the vertebral column and the associated nerves are more pronounced.

Technique

Stage 1: Kneel on the floor with the legs together or slightly separated. The soles of the feet should face upwards.

The arms should be relaxed with the hands resting on the thighs. Keep the thighs, trunk and head perpendicular to the floor. Relax the whole body as much as possible, particularly the back muscles, and breathe normally.

Stage 2: Push the abdomen forwards and slowly bend the head backwards and then the spine. Try to let the weight of the head and back cause the flexion; this ensures maximum relaxation of the back muscles.

As the spine is gradually bent it will become necessary to move the centre of gravity of the body forwards by progressively further protruding the abdomen.

When the spine is bent backwards as far as is comfortable (the top of the head pointing towards the floor), slowly place the hands on the heels or ankles.

When the practitioner becomes proficient in the execution of this asana, the arms should not support the weight of the body but merely provide greater stability in the final pose. In fact, when the asana is executed correctly, the weight of the trunk and head should all be sustained at the knees. However, to attain proficiency

takes time and the beginner may support some of the weight of the trunk and head with the arms (though as little as he is able to). Those people who are completely unable to place their hands on their ankles or heels, can place their hands on the floor behind the feet. It must be remembered, however, that this asana gives maximum efficacy when the spine is bent as much as possible and the



abdomen fully stretched. When the arms sustain any weight and especially when they are placed behind the feet, a large proportion of the flexion of the body occurs at the knees and not the spine.

In the final pose the practitioner should breathe as normally as he is able to, whilst trying to ensure maximum relaxation of the back muscles.

Stay in this position for a comfortable length of time and then slowly return to the starting position.

If this asana is being used as an alternative to dhanurasana, it should be repeated a number of times (at least three times) to produce notable benefits and each for a reasonable duration. If it is practised as well as dhanurasana, then one or two executions is sufficient.

Points to remember whilst executing the asana

1. The asana should be performed slowly and progressively, without any sudden movements.
2. Try to relax the whole body as much as possible, including the legs.
3. Direct the concentration to the vertebral column, abdomen or on maintaining maximum equilibrium and relaxation of the body, particularly the back.
4. Do not attempt to exhale too deeply in the final pose, since the lungs will already be expanded due to the arching of the trunk.

People who are advised not to practise ushtrasana

These are as given for bhujangasana.

Important recommendations

The recommendations given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section should be carefully read before doing ushtrasana.

SUPTA VAJRASANA (sleeping thunderbolt pose)

The Sanskrit word *supta* means ‘sleeping’ and *vajra* is the name of a subtle nerve or pranic channel, *nadi*, associated with the digestive and sexual system. Vajra also means ‘thunderbolt’, the so-called weapon of Indra, King of Gods in Hindu mythology. It is connected with sexual energy.

The English name of this asana is not a completely accurate translation since there is no equivalent word for vajra. It is generally known as the ‘sleeping pelvic pose’ or the ‘supine pelvic pose’.

This asana can replace matsyasana during an asana session.

Benefits

The benefits are very similar to ushtrasana, dhanurasana and especially matsyasana in that the abdominal muscles are effectively stretched, the abdominal and pelvic organs are well compressed and massaged, and the spine given a good backward bend. For details turn to the sections on dhanurasana and ushtrasana.

A brief summary of the benefits is as follows:

Diabetes, constipation, dyspepsia and other abdominal ailments: The increased intra-abdominal pressure improves the efficiency of the internal organs and provokes a good blood supply to them. The nerves innervating the abdominal organs are also stimulated. In this way, ailments of the liver, stomach, intestines, kidneys, spleen and pancreas such as diabetes, constipation and dyspepsia can be relieved or removed. The solar plexus and suprarenal glands are also normalized (refer to section on bhujangasana).

Sexual disorders: A particularly good blood flow is provoked in the pelvic organs and sexual glands. This, together with the simultaneous stretching of the pelvic nerves (especially those of the parasympathetic nervous system), makes this asana very useful in the relief or removal of sexual and eliminative ailments. This is particularly true

with women, since their sexual organs predominantly occupy the pelvic cavity.

The spine and associated ailments: The spinal cord, sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves are given a good stretch and fresh blood is encouraged to flow to them.

The vertebral column is extensively arched with consequent benefits of the musculature, ligaments and general flexibility of the entire spine.

For further details and an indication of the spinal ailments which can be treated by this asana, refer to the sections on bhujangasana and shalabhasana.

The chest or rib cage: The chest is well expanded. The lungs always assume the same shape as the inside of the ribcage. As such the lungs are simultaneously stretched. This improves their functional efficiency. Further, the capacity of the lungs is limited by the location of the ribs relative to each other and the spine. Supta vajrasana, if practised regularly, can rectify deformities in the chest and so improve the lung capacity and operation. This in turn can improve an individual's vitality and general zest for life.

The legs: The legs are strengthened and the articulation of the joints loosened.

Particular effects associated with Alternative 1

This variation gives a good stretch to the nerves and veins of the neck, toning and stimulating these nerves and making the blood vessels more elastic. All the nerves in the trunk, legs and arms which connect with the brain, together with the nerves (sympathetic from the solar plexus) which innervate the eyes, ears and other sense organs pass through the neck. The blood vessels which supply and return the blood to and from the head also pass through the neck. All these functions of the body are consequently favourably influenced by this variation of the asana. These nerves in the neck also receive an improved blood flow and hence better nourishment, further enhancing their operation and the functions they communicate with.

Technique

For optimum benefits from supta vajrasana both final poses given in Stages 3 and 4 should be practised since each has a characteristic influence on the body. The duration of practice for supta vajrasana should therefore be preferably divided between these two alternatives.

Stage 1: Sit in vajrasana. In other words, kneel on the floor and then sit on the inside of the ankles. The toes of the feet should be together, with the soles upwards.

The knees can be together or separated.

Relax the whole body as much as possible, especially the back muscles.

Stage 2: Lean slightly backwards, whilst placing the hands to the side and behind the ankles, and support the weight of the body on the straight arms.

Bend one arm, placing the forearm on the floor.

Transfer the weight of the body onto the bent arm and bend the other arm so that both forearms rest on the ground.

Stage 3 (Alternative 1 – Final position): Tilt the head backwards as much as is comfortably possible to give maximum stretch in the region of the neck.

Using the arms, slowly lower the top of the head towards the floor until the weight of the body is sustained by the head as well as the arms and legs.

Position the head so that the back is arched as much as the individual is able to. Place the hands on the thighs. Breathe deeply and maintain the final position for as long as is comfortable.

This final pose especially influences the vertebral column together with the associated nerves and muscles.



Alternative 1 Stage 3

It also strengthens the neck and favourably affects the nerves and blood vessels passing through this strategic cross road.

Stage 4 (Alternative 2 – Final position): This final position is more difficult to do than Alternative 1 since a greater degree of flexibility is required in the legs and thighs. This alternative particularly stretches the abdomen and pelvis and so is very useful for ailments of these regions.

Using the support of the arms, lower the upper back and the back of the head so that they are flat on the floor.

Raise the head slightly off the ground, slide the arms under the head and attempt to grasp the opposite shoulders with the hands. If the individual finds this difficult the hands may be clasped and placed under the head.

In either position rest the head on the arms or hands as the case may be. Try to position the whole back as close as possible to the ground.

In the final position breathe slowly and deeply whilst relaxing the body. Maintain for as long as is comfortable and then return to the starting position executing Stage 2 in the reversed order.

Points to remember whilst executing the asana

1. Do not bend the back more than its flexibility will allow. In fact, since the leg muscles and joints are strongly used, beginners should definitely not attempt supra vajrasana until they can sit comfortably in vajrasana. These people should preferably do the simplified variation described later in this section.
2. Concentration should be directed to either the spine, abdomen, pelvis or the expansion of the lungs during inhalation. Spiritual aspirants should concentrate on manipura chakra in the region of the solar plexus whilst in the final pose. Concentration can also be directed to the neck, or to vishuddhi chakra in Alternative 1.

3. Do not try to move the legs or feet except in the starting position. Do not force the knees to touch the ground in the final pose.
4. Breathe deeply in the final position to accentuate the action on the lungs and abdominal organs. During expiration contract the abdominal muscles to give maximum expulsion of air from the lungs and the internal organs.
5. A reasonable duration to obtain notable benefits is about two or three minutes. Beginners should gradually increase the duration over a period of weeks or months to allow the legs in particular to adopt themselves to the intense stretch they undergo.

Restrictions on practice

These are as given for bhujangasana. People with abnormally weak necks should not do Alternative 1. Supta vajrasana notably gives an accentuated flexion of the lumbar region of the back between the hips and the lower ribs. Therefore, people with chronic problems in this area, though they can probably obtain benefits, should consult an expert prior to any attempt at practising this asana.

Simplified variation for beginners

This variation gives essentially the same benefits as Alternative 1 of supta vajrasana, though at a lower level. It does not, however, give the pronounced influence in the pelvic area and the legs, characterized by supta vajrasana. This modified asana is useful for those people who have a rigid back and stiff legs.

Stage 1: Sit on the ground with the trunk upright and the legs straight in front of the body.

Stage 2: Execute the same procedure as described in Stage 2 of supta vajrasana.

Stage 3: With the weight of the trunk and head supported on both elbows and forearms accentuate the curvature of the back whilst tilting the head backwards.

Move the forearms forwards so that the top of the head rests on the ground.

Place the hands on the thighs, so that the weight of the trunk is sustained by the buttocks and the top of the head.

Breathe slowly and deeply to accentuate the influence on the lungs and abdominal organs. Remain in the final position for a comfortable length of time and then return to the starting position.

Important recommendations

These are given in the 'Important Recommendations' of the general section. Remember that this asana stimulates the secretions of the suprarenal glands, including adrenalin. Since this hormone increases the vitality of the entire body this asana should not be done before retiring to bed.

MATSYASANA (fish pose)

In Sanskrit the word *matsya* means 'fish'. This asana is therefore known as the 'fish pose'. It is given this name, not only because it bears some resemblance to a fish, but because it allows a person to float easily and for an extended period of time in water. The reason is that the legs are locked in a firm position, making the body a compact shape with a more centrally situated centre of gravity which prevents the body from capsizing.

A person must be able to do *padmasana*, the lotus pose, to execute this asana. People who are unable to perform *padmasana* should practise *supta vajrasana* or its simplified variation.

Benefits

The benefits are almost exactly the same as for *supta vajrasana*, notably affecting the pelvic and abdominal organs, the spine and related nerves and muscles, and the lungs. The blood circulation in the legs is greatly reduced by the

compression of the main arteries, the femoral arteries, by the folded legs. The blood flow is diverted to the pelvic organs and the sexual glands, the testes and prostate for males and the ovaries for females. In this way, many sexual problems are relieved and eliminated by matsyasana. Youthfulness and vitality are also extensively controlled by the testes and ovaries and these desirable attributes are also improved or regularized by this asana.

Technique

There are two methods of doing classical matsyasana, both of which have distinctive affects on the body.

The first two stages are the same for both of the versions.

Stage 1: Sit in padmasana.

Stage 2: Execute Stage 2 of supta vajrasana.

Stage 3 (Alternative 1 – Final position): Perform Stage 3 as described for supta vajrasana. Accentuate the curvature of the back by holding the feet with the hands and using them as levers.

The same benefits are obtained as in the corresponding pose of supta vajrasana. Note especially the section entitled ‘Particular effects associated with Alternative 1’ in the section on supta vajrasana.

Stage 4 (Alternative 2 – Final position): Perform Stage 4 of supta vajrasana. Again the benefits characteristic of Alternative 2 of supta vajrasana will be obtained.



Points to remember whilst executing the asana

Read notes 2, 4 and 5 given in the section on supta vajrasana. Those people who have been advised in ‘Restrictions on

practice' in the supta vajrasana section should also not do this asana.

Important recommendations

The 'Important recommendations' given in the general section should be carefully read.

CHAKRASANA (wheel pose)

The Sanskrit word *chakra* means 'wheel' and so the English name of this asana is the 'wheel pose'. This asana is also sometimes known as oordhwa dhanurasana, 'raised bow pose'.

The execution of this asana requires the practitioner to have a reasonably flexible back. Before attempting chakrasana it is therefore advisable to do other backward bending poses for some time to make the back supple.

Benefits

This asana gives essentially the same benefits as dhanurasana and ushtasana. Therefore, for general details of the benefits refer to the sections on these asanas.

Chakrasana notable influences the following regions of the body.

The spine: Regular practice of this asana can give the practitioner an exceptionally supple spine from the lower back to the neck. It gives a more accentuated curvature of the spine than dhanurasana, and so in this respect, it is a more powerful spinal asana than dhanurasana. In this way, lordosis, backache and other problems of the spine can be eliminated.

The spinal nerves: As with dhanurasana, the following nerves are stimulated:

- i) The spinal cord and the related nerves that emerge from the spinal canal, the space within the vertebral column which carries the nerves to and from the brain.
- ii) The sympathetic nerves that are located in the spinal muscles on either side of the vertebral column.

iii) The parasympathetic nerves that emerge from the region of the neck and from the spine in the pelvic region.

As has already been explained, these nerves innervate the entire body, and so chakrasana's influence on these nerves improves the functioning of the whole human organism.

This stimulation is supplemented by an improved blood flow to these nerves, which further improves their operational efficiency.

A particularly noticeable effect is a general feeling of wellbeing and euphoria that this asana can bring about by its action on the nervous system.

Abdominal organs: These organs are compressed by the extensive stretch imposed on the abdominal muscles in the same way as other backward bending poses, giving them a good massage and improved blood circulation. Many abdominal disorders can be removed by this asana. The solar plexus is simultaneously stimulated, which further influences the functioning of the abdominal organs.

Pelvic organs: By simultaneously improving the blood flow and activating the parasympathetic nerves the genitourinary organs are beneficially influenced, together with the sexual glands. In this way many sexual ailments can be relieved, such as painful or irregular menstruation, menopausal difficulties, spermatorrhoea, leucorrhoea, etc.

The brain and the endocrinal glands: This asana can almost be described as a semi-inverted pose. If it can be maintained for a reasonable duration (a few minutes for example, which is much easier to say than do), a favourable influence on the brain and the pituitary, pineal and thyroid glands can result. This is mainly caused by the gravity-assisted enhanced flow of blood to the region of the neck and head. The importance of even a minimal improvement in the operation of the brain and these glands hardly needs to be mentioned, since they control the entire body, physically and mentally. Therefore, many illnesses, which on first reflection seem to have

no connection with these glands and the brain, can be relieved by doing chakrasana or any inverted pose. The following are a few examples:

- **Diabetes:** This is a useful asana for treating this disease. The pituitary gland is believed to control the secretion of insulin by the pancreas. The asana acts on this gland as well as on the pancreas and solar plexus (refer to the section on bhujangasana).
- Nervous illnesses such as neurasthenia, migraine, hypertension and depression
- Bad facial complexion
- Nasal, throat, eye and ear ailments.

The suprarenal glands are also normalized by this asana. The excessive secretion of adrenalin is connected with stress and the insufficient secretion with lack of vitality; inadequate secretion of cortisone is associated with rheumatism. Chakrasana also helps to regularize the sexual glands and cure related illnesses.

The chest and heart: The smooth functioning of the lungs and heart depends greatly on their elasticity. Chakrasana effectively stretches these organs and so improves their general condition.

Technique

Stage 1: Lie flat on the back.

Bend the legs and place the feet near the buttocks, the feet together or separate with the soles flat on the floor. The practitioner should experiment to find the most suitable distance of the feet from the buttocks to allow ease in executing this asana.

Bend the arms and place the hands beside and behind the head, palms flat on the floor, with the fingers pointing towards the feet. Relax the whole body for a short time.

Stage 2: Whilst straightening the arms and legs, and simultaneously pushing the feet and hands, raise the body off the ground as much as possible without strain.

Try to arch the back and neck as much as the suppleness of the spine will allow, and make the arms and legs straight.

Beginners may find this difficult initially, but as their backs become more supple and their arms stronger, the asana will become progressively easier to do. As already explained, people with rigid backs should practise other backward bending poses for at least a few weeks before attempting chakrasana.

Remain in the final position for a comfortable length of time, breathing as deeply as is possible to accentuate the massage of the internal organs and then return to the starting position. The asana can be repeated a few times according to the discretion of the individual. In other words, the practitioner should not attempt the pose if he is even slightly physically tired.



Points to note whilst executing the asana

1. Do not strain the back by bending it more than its flexibility will comfortably allow.
2. For those persons with a supple spine, the arching of the back can be accentuated by slowly moving the hands towards the feet.
3. Concentration should be on the spine, relaxation of the body, particularly the back muscles, or the abdomen. Spiritual aspirants should direct their awareness to manipura chakra.

4. The soles and palms should preferably remain flat on the floor throughout the execution of the asana.

People who should not attempt chakrasana

These are as given for bhujangasana, together with people who have weak arms.

Important recommendations

These are given in the Important Recommendations' of the general section and should be carefully read.

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA (half spinal twist)

Matsyendranatha is the name of an ancient sage who is reputed to have first developed poorna matsyendrasana, full spinal twist pose, taught it to his students and meditated in this asana for long periods of time. However, it is an exceptionally difficult asana to do and a modified form called ardha matsyendrasana, half spinal twist pose, is generally accepted as being more suitable for most people. It gives essentially the same benefits and is far easier to execute.

It is a very important asana and the only one that applies an exaggerated twist to the spine and trunk. It should therefore be performed during each asana session. People who find ardha matsyendrasana too difficult should do the simplified variation given later in this section.

Benefits

This asana can bring about wonderful improvements in the functioning of the body, helping to render it free of disease. It generally tones the nerves, muscles, organs and glands in the region of the spine.

The following is a brief description of the benefits of doing this pose.

The back: The powerful torsion applied to the trunk and spine simultaneously contracts the muscles and nerves of the

back on one side, whilst stretching the muscles and nerves on the other side. When the trunk is twisted in the opposite direction the process is the same, but reversed. The overall result is a good compression and extension of these nerves and muscles. As with backward and forward bending poses, sluggish or stagnant blood in the entire back is encouraged to circulate and be replaced by purified blood. This helps to remove unhealthy toxins and revitalizes the muscles and nerves of these regions.

The twisting of the vertebral column also prevents any tendency of adjoining vertebrae to fuse together, this being particularly prevalent with elderly people.

The ailments associated with the back have already been discussed in other sections on backward bending poses, particularly in the section on bhujangasana, and so will not be detailed again. However, as a guide, ardha matsyendrasana notably helps to rectify the following ailments:

- Backache and general stiffness
- Spinal deformities such as lordosis
- Mild cases of slipped disc
- Sciatica
- Round shoulders.

By improving the conditions of the nerves in and around the spine, youthfulness can be maintained together with an improvement of the general health of the body.

This asana can also produce a feeling of tranquillity and euphoria, side by side with vitality.

The abdominal organs: The organs on each side of the abdomen are also alternately stretched and compressed, the compression being partly achieved by the pressure of the thighs against the abdomen. This gives the organs a good massage and a good blood supply. In this way many illnesses of the liver, kidneys, intestines, stomach, spleen, and pancreas may be removed. The following ailments are notably relieved:

- Constipation, by the general compression of the intestines and stimulation of the nerves which innervate the

peristaltic motion. It should be remembered that faecal matter travels upwards in the ascending colon in the right side of the abdomen, then along the transverse colon and downwards to the anus in the descending colon in the left side of the body. This asana should therefore be done with the body first twisted to the right to compress the intestines in the same order as the movement of faeces.

- Dyspepsia, by the general improvement in the functioning of the digestive organs
- Lumbago and general rheumatism, by the action on the suprarenal glands. Refer to the section on bhujangasana for details
- Lack of vitality, by activating the secretion of adrenalin from the suprarenal glands
- Diabetes, by massaging the pancreas and encouraging the islets of Langerhans to secrete insulin
- Impure blood, by improving the action of the kidneys.

Spiritual benefits

This asana is said to be extremely useful for spiritual development. The fact that Yogi Matsyendranath performed long meditations in the fish pose, *poorna matsyendrasana*, seems to verify its reputation. Certainly it is a very stable and comfortable pose requiring little muscular effort; this alone is enough to recommend it for meditation.

Spiritual aspirants should concentrate on *ajna chakra*, the eyebrow centre.

Technique

Stage 1: Sit on the floor, with the legs stretched in front.

Bend the right leg and place the right foot on the outside of the left knee, the ankle in contact with the knee, the sole flat on the ground and the toes facing forwards.

Fold the left leg to the right and place the heel against the right buttock in the region of the perineum, the region between the sexual organs and the anus.

Place the left arm in contact with the outside face of the right leg, the armpit near the knee and the hand holding the ankle or instep. To do this it will be necessary to twist the trunk slightly to the right and push the right thigh towards the abdomen.

Place the right arm behind the back and either push the hand towards the neck or towards the left thigh.

Stage 2: Make the trunk as straight and vertical as possible. Relax the whole body.

Inhale deeply and then with exhalation slowly twist the back towards the right by levering the left arm against the right leg and pushing the right arm further towards the neck or thigh. The back should be totally passive and take no part in the execution of the asana.

When the back will twist no further slowly turn the neck in the same direction as the trunk. Look over

the right shoulder. In the final pose, make sure that the trunk and head are vertical. Breathe deeply and slowly to accentuate the massage of the abdominal organs. Remain in the final position for a comfortable length of time and then return to the starting position.

Repeat Stages 1 and 2 in the opposite direction, so that the body is twisted to the left.



Alternative position of the arms: To obtain more leverage, the left arm can be pushed under the right thigh, the hand grasping the hand of the other arm behind the back. This also gives a more stable final pose.

Points to remember whilst executing the asana

1. Do not twist the trunk more than is comfortable. After regular practice the associated muscles will become more supple to allow a reasonably good twist without strain.

2. Direct the concentration towards the abdomen, spine or respiration, or to ajna chakra for spiritual purposes.
3. Try to place the forward facing arm so that the armpit is as near the upright knee as possible.
4. Direct the gaze of the eyes as far behind the back as is possible.
5. Duration in the final pose is left to the choice of the practitioner, though a minute or two in each direction of twist is sufficient to give beneficial results. Spiritual aspirants can, of course, stay in the final position for longer periods.
6. It is most important that the trunk and head are slowly returned to the starting position, to allow all bones, muscles and nerves to resume their normal position.

People who should not attempt ardha matsyendrasana

These people are listed in the section on bhujangasana.

Simplified variation for beginners

People who are unable to do ardha matsyendrasana can perform the following variation to obtain the same benefits though at a reduced level.

Stage 1: Repeat Stage 1 of ardha matsyendrasana, but with the following modifications:

- i) Keep the left leg straight and flat on the floor.
- ii) Place the right arm behind the back with the palm flat on the floor. The most suitable position must be found by individual experience.

Stage 2: Perform Stage 2 of ardha matsyendrasana, but twist the trunk by a combination of the leverage of the left arm against the right leg, and a force applied between the right hand and the floor. After a comfortable length of time return to the forward facing position, rearrange the body and repeat a similar twist to the left. When the practitioner's back becomes more supple, he should try to execute ardha matsyendrasana in preference to continuing with the simplified version.

Poorna Matsyendrasana for adepts

People with exceptionally supple bodies can attempt poorna matsyendrasana using directions given in the ancient yoga treatise, *Gheranda Samhita* (2:23 and 24):



Twist your stomach towards the back and maintain a sitting position. Fold and place your left leg on the right thigh. Position the right leg on the left side of the left thigh. Put one hand across the right leg and firmly grip the right foot. Fix your gaze at the eyebrow centre. This is called matsyendrasana.

Yoga is Balance

The following article by Swami Satyananda Saraswati was published under the title 'Yoga and Present Day Living' in the January 1973 issue of YOGA magazine. It is a summary of the aim and purpose of yoga and its continued relevance to people from all walks of life.

Yoga is the common heritage of mankind, though it was protected, kept secret and carefully guarded on the Indian soil by rishis and mahatmas. There have been people throughout the world, who were great yogis, but unfortunately this science was not preserved by any race, nation or religion except in India. This is because the Indian people have respect for higher and spiritual life, and because Indians look upon those who practise and preach yoga with great respect. As such, the rishis, saints and sages of India were protected and patronized for centuries and centuries.

Yoga brakes

We have to note one important point about yoga: it is a method by which we can control the anarchical tendencies of the mind. Yoga is not for suppressing the mind. No, yoga is not an act of suppression. Even as we control the waters of a river through the method of canalization and use those channels for constructive purposes of irrigation in agriculture, in the same manner, the mental energy which is

dissipated and distorted in emotional breakdowns, worries, jealousy, hostility, pride, egoism, passion, anger and greed must be channelled in the proper way or we will suffer dire mental problems.

Who can say that a car doesn't need a brake? It may not be necessary to use a brake when the traffic is clear, but the car must still have a brake. In the same manner, we have a mind, and the mind has its instincts. The mind has its own inhibitions and anarchical behaviour. Not all people are calm, peaceful, and compassionate; not all people have a good mind. People are filled with lower thoughts, lower tendencies, and if no brake is applied, they can have an accident at any time. Therefore, yoga is a brake which allows us to control ourselves.

Man thinks

Coronary thrombosis is an ailment which is affecting millions of people all over the world. Why is this so? Coronary thrombosis is a disease of those people who are involved in competitive lives. It is not a physical disease; it is an act of the emotional human mind. Many of the prevalent diseases which belong to the heart and brain have their origin in competition. I get success, I want more and when I want more success, naturally, I have a competitor. I must work day and night. This kind of anxiety, neurosis and imbalanced life ultimately ends in what is called thrombosis.

Yoga brings us a message that there is a way out of this situation. Of course, medical science has got its own cure, but yoga gives prevention and prevention is always better than cure. There is no harm in working in the world. There is definitely nothing wrong with accomplishing something, but one must have a balanced way of looking at things. How will balance come? It will not come in one day. A person may read philosophy, scriptures, a lot about bhakti, attachment and detachment, but nothing will work because he cannot control the inflexible cerebrum, the thinking mind. Man thinks.

Thinking is an action, thinking is a reflection of the human cerebrum, the thinking mind. The brain of man keeps on moving. Those tiny cells in the brain keep on working with the influxes of blood, and thoughts control the influxes of blood. Neurons in the brain are controlled by thoughts and this has been proved by scientific experiments. A particular thought can bring about a heart attack. A particular thought can increase the blood pressure immediately. Asthma and similar diseases have their origin in emotional upsets. Now what are these emotional upsets which people have not been trained to manage? People have been taught to get emotionally upset, through pictures, books and training since birth. Who can withstand an emotional crisis? Nobody. It is very difficult.

Control

Emotions are part of human life. You must have love, you must have sympathy, you must give love, you must take love, and when a person is dead in the family, naturally you must also feel sad. However, you must also have control, otherwise what happens is that people develop suicidal tendencies. When this suicidal tendency becomes sufficiently strong they commit suicide. But suppose they do not kill themselves? If I have a suicidal tendency and I do not commit suicide, that tendency is stored up in the unconscious mind and brings about abnormal behaviour in the future and I become pessimistic in my outlook on life. I lose interest in life and then I turn to alcohol, to tranquillizers and to so many other diversions of life. It is therefore necessary that, since we have a mind, we must know how to control it. Yoga practices are very effective methods by which the mind can be controlled. The mind cannot be tamed by philosophy, not by reading a lot of books on this subject, not even by leading a religious life. Only by a yogic life can one control the mind, the physical aspects of the brain, the physical heart and the psychological aspects.

When you take drugs, ganja or LSD, for example, you immediately see the effect. Some people experience a greater

effect and others less. In the same manner, in our society there are people who can develop their equilibrium, mental peace, mental calmness to a great extent; but there are those people who have absolutely no mental peace. They don't even have a fraction of equilibrium. Why talk of big things in life, when even the little things upset them. If I know that someone has been talking about me on the street, I don't sleep at night. Don't you think it is the lack of yoga in me? Yes, it is yoga. Yoga means mental control. Please go through the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It talks about control; it does not talk about renouncing life, wife and children, property and accomplishments. It says, "Have everything with you, but have perfect control over the reactions, over the effects of the actions of the mind." You do your karma, you do your duty, but they should not affect you, they should not bring about a crisis in your life. This is the fundamental teaching of yoga according to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Another scripture, the *Yoga Sutras* of Rishi Patanjali, which is the most important text in yoga, says in the beginning (1:2): "What is yoga? To have automatic control, to have voluntary control, to have spontaneous control over the mind, its tendencies, its fluctuations, its dispassion, is yoga."

Beyond the outer space

When your mind is happy, you must have the capacity to hold that happiness. If your mind is calm, you must have the capacity to hold it there. If the mind is taking you along the wrong path, you must say, "No, I don't want it," and you must bring it back. You must be like a trained horseman. You must be like a good driver so that when the car is going at full speed and the traffic is according to your wish, you should be relaxed but still in control. You should use your car by all means. It does not mean that you should keep your car in the garage as an ornament and then go on foot. The message of yoga is to exercise the mind every day, just a little, so that you have conscious control over the reactions of the brain. This method is known as dhyana. It is known as

dharana, concentration, and *dhyana*, meditation, and can be done by each and everyone. It is not necessary, nor is it right, to say that only sannyasins, saints, monks and mahatmas can practise it. Everyone can and should do it.

There is one widespread misunderstanding about *dhyana* which is that those who want *moksha*, salvation or liberation, can do *dhyana*, but those who are worldly people, given to the human needs of life, should not do *dhyana*. This is an unscientific and untenable statement. *Dhyana* is for those who want to have control over their mental tendencies whenever they need it, whether they have strong or weak minds.

Meditation or *dhyana* is very difficult as far as the practice is concerned. There are a large number of techniques. The first important aim in those techniques is to be able to transcend the outer space or the environment. This is the first practice in meditation, one must be able to transcend the outer space, so that one forgets what is taking place outside. Any practice that can bring you to that particular point is called the practice of tranquillity. This space, this outer space about which one is aware twenty-four hours, should be transcended for a few minutes everyday, and when one has transcended the outer space or the outer consciousness, one develops peace and tranquillity within. The blood pressure throughout the body is completely adjusted, and not only that, carbon-dioxide, toxins, tensions in the cerebrum, in the cardiac region and everywhere slowly disappear. This practice of relaxation, this practice of tranquillity is so difficult that one has to study a little about it.

Methods

There are numerous methods according to Indian tradition. One method is *nada yoga*, the method of tranquilizing the mind with the help of sound. There are various methods in *nada yoga*. One is the method of simple sound, another is the method of music. Music is also a part of *nada yoga* but it is not for recreation or for a sense of enjoyment. It is a

method in yoga that helps and assists the mind to transcend the outer space.

The second method is japa yoga, that is to coordinate a mantra with the natural breath. A third method is trataka, to look at a candle flame or concentrate on some point. There are other practices, such as the practice of kundalini yoga, in which the mind has to concentrate on the psychic centres in the body. These psychic centres are situated in the spinal cord, right from the bottom to the top. There are seven psychic centres. They are called chakras. The chakra for meditation should be chosen according to one's temperament, inclination and evolution. Some people meditate on the navel centre, others meditate on the heart centre, yet others meditate on the centre between the two eyebrows. However, this will have to be decided after a lot of study by the individual.

One does not need to practise everything. With the right practice, fifteen minutes will be sufficient time to transcend the outer space. One does not need years and years to develop the technique. However, if one practises the wrong technique which does not suit one's personality, then it will take years and years.

An important practice useful for all people is to close the eyes and follow the thoughts that come into the mind without suppression. This is the practice of antar mouna. It should be done for about ten or fifteen minutes daily. Sitting quietly one may ask oneself, "What am I thinking? Am I thinking about business, family, relations, the future, the past? Am I thinking useful, useless, negative or good thoughts?" Everything must be allowed to come. One just remains a seer, a witness, without being attached or detached, just looking at the thoughts impartially. After ten or fifteen minutes one should repeat one's mantra. Tranquillity will come within twenty minutes. Then one must have a point, image or a form for concentration. One must have it. It can be a star, a flame of light, a flower, a deity, it is all the same. One must have some image or form on which one is able to concentrate the mind.

Two personalities

People need a strong mind and this mental strength can come by doing yoga. A little yoga practice saves one from emotional crises. If there are conflicts in the personality, one can do something about them. Conflicts are very difficult to remove but it is true that by the practice of yoga, one can bring about harmony between the two personalities. *Bhoga* means suppression and *yoga* means union. When two things become one it is called yoga.

What are those two things that become one in yoga? The philosophers have been saying that the individual self and the Cosmic Self become one. The bhaktas say that they become one with God. As a student of psychology I know that there are two personalities in every man, the ego and the super-ego, and they are always in conflict with each other. Every person has two personalities, the subconscious personality and the higher personality. A person is something to himself and something else to another person. This schizophrenia is an attitude. It can be called a split personality. Everyone has two personalities, or is two personalities, and the two personalities should be fused into one. That is the ultimate aim of yoga. What one is inside, one is also outside. What is outside, that is also inside. If I am a thief, I am a thief to me, I am a thief to all. If I am a good man, I am a good man to me, I am good to all.

This particular fusion of the split personality into one is called yoga. It is not possible to achieve in one day, it takes time. But according to the science of psychology, and according to the science of yoga, as long as there is a struggle between these two personalities, the ego and the super-ego, one's behaviour will not remain the same. One will always remain abnormal in some way. Thoughts will be clouded, decisions will never be true. Therefore, in order to succeed in life and in order to be happy along with your success, it is necessary that everyone practises yoga. People want success and work for it, but even after having achieved success, they do not achieve happiness. There are some people who are

successful, but unhappy, and yet there are some people who are happy but unsuccessful.

Yoga and civilization

With action, work or *karma* on the one hand, and yoga on the other hand, we should travel smoothly through life. This modern civilization, which has been a matter of allurements to us, is not complete and it is not final. It is only a phase. Perhaps in a decade or two if we all meet again, we shall know the limitations of this modern civilization. It is a phase, it is not complete in itself, and this is going to lead somewhere, perhaps to the same point in history as Babylon and Greece.

However, if we remain alert about this modern civilization and especially about the effects of the human mind, then perhaps we may survive as a culture, just as India has survived against the accidents of history and ravages of time. We want everything modern. This attitude is alright, but at the same time, we must realize that it is not final. Once we become the slaves of modern civilization, naturally our minds will become weak and as a culture we will perish. It has happened in the past. Therefore, it is necessary that we accept the modern culture and civilization, because it is a part of human life, but we have to understand its limitations and supplement it with yoga.

Yoga is for the mind, and civilization is for worldly comforts. With both, one will survive in one's culture and attain happiness.



Blood Pressure Management through Yoga

Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Sri Swami Satyananda recommends yoga practices and a change of lifestyle to manage an imbalance in blood pressure, both high and low. A complete eight-week training program is also given to guide and support the practitioner's effort to learn and master the asanas. Originally published in booklet form in 1973, *Blood Pressure Management through Yoga* encountered such interest that it was soon followed by a second edition in 1975.

Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati (compiler)

In June 1967 Swami Yogeshwarananda (The Netherlands) came to Munger to join the nine-month International Yoga Teachers Training course held from July 1967 to March 1968. On 2nd November 1967 she was initiated into sannyasa. Everyone was amazed at the remarkable quickness with which she assimilated not only the fundamentals but also the deep-rooted philosophies of yoga. She dedicated her life to yoga and the welfare of humankind.

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INTRODUCTION

The first principle of life is movement. In this living world nothing is permanent or motionless. Everything that comes is bound to go. For us human beings the same law is applicable. There definitely comes a time when we will have to leave. This does not mean, however, that we should rush through life neglecting the delicacy of our body, having no respect for other beings and considering our own wants and needs as the only important things, without trying to find out the real purpose of our coming into this world.

It is possible to let the mind rule over the body, to live with a wise mind. If you are driving your car carelessly it will not last for a very long time; the motor will soon give up. Since the heart is the motor in our body, the 'pacemaker' which sets everything else into motion, it is obvious that the heart is generally the first part to give up. One who lives fast cannot hope to live for a very long time. We have received this body to take proper care of and not to misuse. It is possible to live many years without showing any sign of 'running out'. There are many examples of yogis who live for a hundred years or more and, of course, still remain useful. Any disease or disorder in our body should be considered as a warning that we are not living wisely and that we will have to correct ourselves. The way has been shown to us by the same yogis, and that way is yoga. With proper breathing, efficient relaxation and adequate exercise, every disorder, provided it is not organic in nature, can be corrected by the practices of yoga.

Hypertension and hypotension, high and low blood pressure, are not exceptions to this rule. When the blood pressure is either too high or too low it indicates that there is something wrong in the body. It should be kept in mind that in most cases high blood pressure and also low blood pressure is not a disease as such, but a symptom of another disease. In cases of diabetes for instance, high blood pressure is a result of the development of arteriosclerosis. If

the diabetes is cured, the blood pressure will automatically come down. By treating the cause and not the symptoms of the disease, they automatically disappear. In essential hypertension, for which no cause can be determined, it is essential to avoid great mental or emotional excitement, which can be achieved by keeping a strong and steady mind. Another important factor is not to give extra labour to the heart which tends to increase the blood pressure by observing a well-balanced diet so that obesity is avoided or eliminated along with the full arterial deposits that generally accompany an unbalanced high cholesterol diet.

The following yoga training course for the treatment of blood pressure irregularities has been successfully taught to many patients suffering from this frequently fatal disorder of the human body, at associated ashrams of Bihar School of Yoga, Munger, Bihar, India. It is a combination of complete physical and mental relaxation, *yoga nidra*, psychic sleep, *pranayama*, controlled breathing exercises, and *yogasanas*, deliberate and balanced physical exercises.

We are publishing it with a great feeling of gratitude to our guru, Paramahansa Satyananda, for the opportunity to spread this beneficial knowledge to all parts of the world and to contribute to creating a humanity which is physically, mentally and spiritually sound and healthy.

BLOOD PRESSURE REGULATION

The blood, which always maintains a definite volume of five to six litres in an adult person, circulates through the body. There are two subsections of this circulatory system. One is called the systematic circulation and the other is called the pulmonary circulation. The systematic circulation pumps the blood from the heart through the aorta and its branches, the arteries, to all parts and tissues of the body where it fulfils its functions of nourishing the tissues and removing waste products from the cells. After this the blood returns back to the heart from where it is pumped through the pulmonary artery to the lungs, where it gives carbon dioxide and other waste materials and takes up oxygen. This oxygenated blood then returns to the heart and is again circulated through the body.

The two circulatory systems are well separated from each other. The left half of the heart contains only oxygenated pure blood, while the right half of the heart contains only reduced impure blood. The two parts of the heart are separated by a septum or partition muscle. Each half of the heart is again subdivided into two parts, an upper and a lower chamber, separated from each other by valves which only open to let the blood flow from the upper chamber into the lower chamber.

The left upper chamber, or auricle, receives fresh blood through the pulmonary vein from the lungs. From the auricle the blood is pressed into the left lower chamber, or ventricle. This ventricle, in its turn, presses the blood through the aorta into the body, gradually flowing through all the different parts and tissues, giving up nourishing products and oxygen. The blood then returns in increasingly large veins to the heart where it enters into the right upper chamber or auricle. At this point the heart is at rest, diastole. The valves between the auricles and ventricles are closed. Both the auricles become filled at the same time, the left one with oxygenated blood and the right one with deoxygenated blood. At the

moment when the pressure in the auricles becomes greater than that in the ventricles they begin to fill with blood, while the auricles contract to push more blood down. This is the auricle systole. Then, when the ventricles, though relaxed, become overfilled and stretched, the ventricle systole begins. The pressure in the ventricles increases, becomes greater than that of the auricles, and the valve between the auricles and ventricles close. The contraction of the ventricles continues and the pressure increases. When the pressure in the ventricles becomes greater than that of the aorta and the pulmonary artery the valves between the ventricles and arteries are pushed open and the blood circulation begins. Then, after emptying themselves, the ventricles relax and the heart is again at rest, diastole.

The cycle of systole and diastole takes place at a rate of 75 per minute and the duration of one heartbeat is approximately 0.8 second. Though the contraction of the heart takes place without getting any impulses from the higher nervous system, the frequency of the heartbeat is influenced and stimulated by the nerve impulses from both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves. That is one reason why emotional and psychological events such as fear and excitement influence the heart rate and directly alter the blood pressure.

The action of the parasympathetic nervous system is to restrain the heart's action. The action of the sympathetic nervous system is to speed up the heart's action. The two systems counterbalance each other to keep the heartbeat and the blood pressure at a steady rate. As the blood is always leaving the heart with an impulse, the blood is constantly pressed or pushed into the arteries. With every new beat another influx of blood is pressed into the arteries. The walls of the arteries, being made of elastic tissue, are always under a certain tension. When the heart contracts and more blood is pushed into them, they become stretched and the pressure increases. This is called the systolic pressure. When the heart relaxes, these arterial walls lose some of their stretch as

the blood flows through the arterioles (small arteries), but when the next contraction takes place they remain under a certain stretch, which is called the diastolic pressure. If the pressure in the arteries fell down to zero on each diastole and the flow of blood came to a standstill, it would be very difficult for the heart to repeatedly create momentum in the standing blood with every new contraction. As long as the walls of the vessels are stretched, they press against the fluid inside and keep the blood under a certain pressure. It is this pressure which we measure with an instrument called the sphygmomanometer.

IRREGULAR BLOOD PRESSURE

In a healthy individual the normal blood pressure during systole is 120 mmHg and during diastole 80 mmHg. This blood pressure varies in different subjects. For instance, in a child the blood pressure in systole ranges from 75–90mmHg, and in an old person it can be 130–150mmHg. In females usually the blood pressure is lower than in males but the difference is not much. During sleep the pressure falls by 20–30 mmHg. In obese people the blood pressure is usually higher than in very thin people. When the systolic pressure in an adult is 150 mmHg or more it is called hypertension or high blood pressure, and when it comes below 110 mmHg it is called low blood pressure. When, due to excitement or emotional tension, the blood pressure rises up to 150mmHg or more it should not be considered as a disorder. Only when, over an extended period of time, the blood pressure constantly remains at such a high level should it be taken seriously.

Factors influencing the blood pressure

There are three main factors influencing the blood pressure in the arteries:

- i) Peripheral output
- ii) Cardiac output
- iii) Blood volume.

i) Any fluid flowing in a tube meets with a certain resistance, due to the friction of the molecules of that fluid against the walls of the tube. Where the friction is at the highest point, the speed of the fluid flow is almost nil, whereas in the centre of the tube where there is almost no friction, the speed is greatest. This means that in a narrow tube the resistance is greater than in a wide tube. In the arterioles the pressure would rise more than preferable and therefore this is counteracted by the vasomotor system. Nerve impulses through this system can either contract or dilate the arterioles and thus regulate the increased pressure.

ii) If the heart increased its output, the vessels would be overfilled, the walls overstretched and the pressure would rise remarkably.

iii) The same would happen if the blood volume increased, the walls would be overstretched and the blood pressure would rise remarkably, or in the opposite case when due to haemorrhage, for instance, the blood volume decreases considerably, the walls would collapse and the blood pressure would fall.

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

When the blood pressure rises up to 150 mmHg or more and maintains such a high level, it is called high blood pressure. There are two kinds of high blood pressure or hypertension: a) essential hypertension and b) symptomatic hypertension.

The real cause of essential hypertension remains unknown, though the immediate cause is constriction of the arterioles. As a result the heart is unable to expel all the blood against the pressure existing in the arteries, some blood remains in the ventricle, and with the next diastole, when the auricle empties itself, the ventricle gets slowly dilated, ending in heart hypertrophy. If this is not treated and the pressure still rises, for instance due to heavy physical or emotional tension, the heart in trying to overcome the extra pressure will enter a state called fibrillation, uncoordinated contractions of muscle, the pulse beat becomes very irregular and finally the person dies. This fatality is obviously in store for every case of hypertension, so people who die of essential hypertension actually die of heart failure, about 70%. Another 20 % of people dying from hypertension die from stroke, rupture of one of the arteries in the brain which, during high blood pressure, are more likely to rupture than elsewhere in the body. It depends upon the place in the brain where the stroke took place whether it results in paralysis, insanity or death. Most of the 10% remaining victims of hypertension die from rupture of the renal arteries.

The causes of symptomatic hypertension are manifold. It is often a complication in diabetes mellitus, blood pressure rising in acute and chronic nephritis and other kidney diseases, in some endocrinal disorders, sometimes during pregnancy and coarctation, narrowing of a short section of the aorta. Hypertension often causes coronary thrombosis. In arteriosclerosis there is deposit of a fatty substance,

cholesterol, inside the blood vessels. This cholesterol is mostly present in fats we eat. When it is deposited inside a blood vessel, it thickens the wall, makes the path for the blood to pass smaller and as a result the peripheral resistance increases. The blood pressure rises in order to overcome this resistance and the final result is symptomatic hypertension. If this is not treated in time the blood cells, fulfilling their different duties, make the blood coagulate. A blood clot is formed and when this clot or even a piece of it is carried away by the bloodstream it finally reaches near the heart, settles itself somewhere in one of the arteries supplying the heart with blood, and finally the heart itself gets insufficient or no blood and stops functioning.

Through meditation the following metabolic factors can be reduced:

- Oxygen consumption
- Heart rate
- Secretion of adrenaline, a hormone causing rise of blood pressure.

As the blood pressure rises excessively the intensity of stimuli is increased. The cardiac centre increases the nervous output over the vagus and the heart slows down. During intense emotion, the heart rate increases. The stimuli to the cardiac centre come from the hypothalamus in the brain, either stimulating the vagus or the sympathetic nerves and the heart rate acts accordingly.

From this it can be easily understood that hypertension, though not always a direct disease, is not to be neglected. It is always advisable to avoid fatty, cholesterol containing substances. Secondly, one should strive for a regular blood circulation which can be accomplished by proper and regular breathing and by special meditation techniques.

In the medulla oblongata is situated the vasomotor centre, which regulates the pressure. Especially in diastolic pressure, the vasodilators (the nerve fibres that dilate the vessels), are to be stimulated by parasympathetic impulses. Likewise the outflow of impulses to the vasoconstrictors are

to be inhibited. This same centre controls the depth of our awareness, sleep, breath, and so on. One of the reasons why pranayama is so beneficial is that by conscious breathing a greater flow of impulses from this centre is created, resulting in restoration of breath reflex and normalization of the breath. During meditation several changes in the blood take place:

- The heart pumps less frequently.
- The body produces less carbon dioxide and consumes less oxygen.
- Less lactic acid is produced in the blood, a possible indication of reduced anxiety.

Symptoms of high blood pressure

The symptoms of high blood pressure are headache, vertigo or giddiness, dyspnoea (breathing trouble), palpitation, languor (weakness), feeling of fullness above the head, disinclination for exercise, depression, disturbed vision and insomnia.

It is our firm belief that by following the instructions given in this course many people suffering from high blood pressure will be benefited highly and not only be relieved of their ailment, but at the same time be on their way to a higher aim in life.

LOW BLOOD PRESSURE

When the blood pressure falls down below 110 mmHg during systole and 70mmHg during diastole, it is called low blood pressure. This often happens when there is sudden loss of blood due to an accident. It is usually one of the subsidiary symptoms of anaemia. When the volume of blood decreases, the blood pressure falls remarkably. A sudden fall in blood pressure can also take place on account of overwhelming pain. The heart slows down and the pressure falls due to over stimulation of the vasomotor centre in the medulla. The blood circulation becomes insufficient and the intake of oxygen greatly depressed, the blood remains stagnant in any of the organs and finally the victim dies.

There seems to be a kind of essential hypotension, wherein the blood pressure always remains low. In these cases the person is advised to take to yoga practices such as pranayama, yogasanas and meditation, by which the functions of the nervous system and circulatory system are gradually normalized. Yoga practices will have to be learned under proper guidance and personal instruction from an expert.

COMPLETE TRAINING PROGRAMME

The following yoga training course for the treatment of high blood pressure is to be learned and practised under personal guidance from an expert. The best place is at one of the yoga schools or ashrams affiliated with Bihar School of Yoga, Munger, Bihar, where well-trained teachers and sannyasins are available. Though the course has been suggested over a period of eight weeks, it is obvious that much depends on the individual's condition and ability. Accordingly, the length of the training period may increase.

At the same time a moderate non-fat vegetarian diet is to be observed, containing easily digestible food and low salt content.

FIRST AND SECOND WEEK

Asanas

Pawanmuktasana series – except those exercises which are harmful for high blood pressure patients.

Vajrasana – for 10 minutes after each meal. This should be taken up as a daily habit and is therefore mentioned only once.

Shavasana – with breath awareness. It is good to practise shavasana in between the other exercises also.

Pranayama

Simple regular breathing with deep inhalation and exhalation to the ratio 1:1 either while lying down (in the beginning) or in the sitting posture. Practise alternate abdominal and chest breathing.

Sheetali – 5 rounds.

Sheetkari – 5 rounds.

Meditation

Ajapa Japa – Stage 1, awareness of the psychic passage and the up and down movement of the breath within the passage.

Yoga Nidra – Stage 1, relaxation of all parts of the body by rotating the mind slowly from part to part.

THIRD AND FOURTH WEEK

Asanas

Pawanmuktasana

Shavasana – with breath awareness

Surya Namaskara – up to position 5

Shavasana

Pranayama

Regular breathing (see first week)

Ujjayi – 21 rounds

Bhramari – 3 to 5 rounds

Sheetkari – 7 rounds

Meditation

Ajapa Japa – Stage 1 and 2. In Stage 2, awareness of the psychic breath from mooladhara to sahasrara.

Yoga Nidra – Stage 1 and 2. In Stage 2, breath awareness in anahata and counting of breath from fifty to zero.

FIFTH AND SIXTH WEEK

Asanas

Pawanmuktasana

Surya Namaskara – complete 1–3 rounds (3 at the end of the fifth week).

Pranayama

Ujjayi – up to 49 rounds

Nadi Shodhana – Stage 1

Bhramari – 7 rounds

Sheetali – 9 rounds

Sheetkari – 9 rounds

Meditation

Ajapa Japa – complete, in 4 stages.

Nada Sanchalana

Parwan Sanchalana

Shabda Sanchalana

Meditation on Sahasrara

Yoga Nidra – Stages 1, 2, 3 and 4.

In stage 3, breath awareness in vishuddhi and counting 50 to 0.

In Stage 4, breath awareness in both nostrils counting from 50 to 0.

SEVENTH WEEK

Asanas

Parwanmuktasana

Shavasana

Surya Namaskara – 3 rounds

Shavasana

Pranayama

Ujjayi – 49 times. If ajapa is practised immediately after pranayama, then this separate practice of ujjayi can be omitted.

If meditation is practised after some time, then this ujjayi should be practised up to 108 times.

Nadi Shodhana – Stages 1 and 2

Bhramari – 9 rounds

Sheetkari – 9 rounds

Sheetali – 9 rounds

Meditation

Ajapa Japa – complete, 45 minutes

Yoga Nidra – complete, 45 minutes

EIGHTH WEEK

Asanas

Pawanmuktasana and additional *shashankasana*

Padmasana

Surya Namaskara – 5 rounds

Shavasana

Pranayama

Ujjayi – 49 to 108 rounds

Nadi Shodhana – Stages 1, 2 and 3.

Bhramari – 9 rounds

Sheetali – 9 rounds

Sheetkari – 9 rounds

Meditation

Ajapa Japa – complete, 45 minutes

Yoga Nidra – complete, 45 minutes

Teacher's Manual for Teaching Yoga to Children

Swami Satya Vivekananda Saraswati

Under the guidance of
Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

The Teacher's Manual for Teaching Yoga to Children was first published in 1971 at a time of great unrest amongst the youth, not only in India, but around the world. In this manual, Sri Swami Satyananda skilfully brings together the theory and practice of yoga to meet with the needs of children. Teachers receive guidelines and a class plan as tools for their task of giving direction to the youth.

PARAMAHAMSA SATYANANDA SARASWATI

Born 1923

Sannyasa 1947

Mission 1956

A fearless spirit, disciplined and simple habits, independent views, impressive orations, precise judgments, undaunted faith in himself, overflowing love for all, unchallengeable peace, steady wisdom, unsurpassed knowledge of the Vedas and modern science – these qualities and attributes draw only a vague sketch of a dynamic personality living in a modern age.

Though a master and guru of ancient traditions, teachings and techniques, he is at the same time one who has an amazingly thorough knowledge of life in the modern, materialistic societies of both the East and West.

He is one who supplies inspirational food for spiritual expansion and exploration for recluses, sannyasins and hundreds of disciples who have gathered from all corners of the world. Having taken the practices of a more than 4,000 year old esoteric and exoteric science, he developed, tested and formulated direct, scientific, effective and applicable practices and techniques for both those who must play an active roll in a ‘moon landing’ era and those whose path is destined and directed towards mind expansion and journeys into other levels of consciousness.

With a foundation of deep spirituality from childhood, his knowledge and wisdom developed and grew under the blessed guidance and divine teachings of his guru, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, who he lived with and served from 1943 to 1956. His wisdom and understanding are also rooted in the personal experiences of pain and suffering with life itself as the teacher.

This is Paramahansa Satyananda Saraswati founder and inspirer of International Yoga Fellowship Movement

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PART I

What is yoga?

Yoga is the ancient property of humanity, the most valuable treasure man has ever possessed. Man is composed of three things: a body, a mind and a soul. The way to master the body, to have a command over one's mind, to be initiated into the great mysteries of the soul and to bring about a balance among these three states of being – physical, mental and spiritual – is yoga.

Yoga is the way that leads man to himself. It helps him to make his body sound and healthy, and to free his system from all kinds of toxins and foreign matter which create disturbances in his body.

It confronts him with the mess of his own mind and with the errors and complexes in his personality. It helps him to liberate himself from the bonds of his narrow and limited way of thinking – opinions and ideas which were hammered by force into his brain by society and his environment. It brings him back to his own centre and core, and aids him to discover himself and to find out who he really is and what he really wants from life.

Yoga is like a vast ocean with a whole world at the bottom of it. Yoga has many varied aspects which fit the different needs and purposes of each individual practising it.

Literally yoga means 'union', the union of pure consciousness and the individual consciousness within man. But to reach this high state of being, one has to start at the very first rung of the ladder.

Why yoga?

In the present-day world, man has totally violated himself. He has neglected his inner life and has become more and more involved with the outer one. In short, he has disturbed the balance between his internal and external activities, a balance which is necessary for a successful and happy life. He interferes with the natural laws of his body by stuffing

himself with chemical products, drugs, medicines and toxins, which bring about a state of confusion in his entire body. The function of the glands, which secrete various hormones which are necessary for normal growth and development of both body and mind, becomes disturbed. The effect may not be felt directly by man now, but it certainly will be felt by successive generations.

It seems, as man is unknowingly changing his inner being and gradually dulling the human aspect, that he will be forced by and by to function as a mechanical robot, dependent on modern science to replace his lungs with iron lungs and his heart with a plastic heart, in helpless last efforts just to secure three or four additional years of life which actually would not be allotted to him according to his unwise ways of living.

The situations in which he finds himself in society in general today – the political crises, securing a good career, educating his children, striving for a higher standard of material life and so on – preoccupy his mind to the extent that he does not even get a chance to look within himself, and thus he has forgotten all about the hidden powers of the soul. He has buried the ancient knowledge deep inside himself as he continues to work himself more and more into a trap of which he is not even aware. This is the state in which he needs yoga the most.

Yoga is not magic

Yoga should not be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Just as man and his environments have changed, are still changing and will always be changing, likewise people's ideas of yoga and the reason for practising it have changed.

Some people have a completely unjustified fear complex concerning yoga. For many people the word itself is clothed in a mysterious black aura. They do not even want to look behind those forbidding veils, created by their teachers and society, in order to try to understand yoga.

Many think yoga to be a kind of black magic through which one attains miraculous powers, such as sitting in fire,

walking over water, elevating one's body from the floor, drinking nitric acid without harm, and so many more.

There is also the idea of having to become a 'sadhu baba' in order to practise yoga, refraining from all sensual enjoyments, renouncing the world and secluding oneself far away from society in a big jungle or a lonely cave in order to realize God. But if those would be the demands which yoga makes on the individual, it would be something like a doctor locking himself up with all his medicines and knowledge, letting no patient in, or like a very learned professor keeping all his books and wisdom to himself, not allowing any pupil to come near him.

Yoga for householders

Yoga is also for householders who can perhaps profit from it most. The tensions of society and the worries of *grihasth-ashram*, the state of householder life, fill the mind with fear and anger. Man has to fight a constant battle in order to keep his status, to earn money, to maintain his family and to entertain himself. All these worries and troubles affect his body; they make him ill. They are the root cause of all possible diseases.

Yoga for householders, therefore, begins with the asanas. Just as the mind and the body are very much interconnected, so do the effects of asanas influence both the mental and physical aspects of the human being.

Something about the asanas

The body is controlled by the nervous system, the nervous system is controlled by the mind and the mind is influenced by the senses and sense objects. The mind reacts and responds to sensations, which the body experiences through the sense organs, and brings about different states of emotion such as anger, hatred, passion and depression.

The mental state in which one remains influences the nervous system, and the nervous system in its turn acts upon the body. Diseases are caused by malfunctions or defects of

glands or internal organs, which are all controlled by the nervous system.

Yogasanas have a gentle massaging effect upon the nerves, internal organs and glands. Through the practice of asanas the glandular function can be brought in order again. One can learn how to control these functions and how to maintain order in the body.

By the practice of asanas, stiffened limbs and unexercised muscles are made loose and supple again. Even big officers who sit in comfortable chairs the whole day complain of backaches and pains due to their physical inactivity. Headache is no more than a contraction of certain nerves in the head. By the practice of asanas the nerves are relaxed thus eliminating the pain.

Everyone agrees that a healthy body is the most basic need of each man. How difficult it is to think when one's stomach is upset and how easily one becomes irritated when the body is in discomfort. A healthy body is the first step to an optimistic, creative and healthy state of mind.

Disturbed thinking and uncontrolled emotions and feelings have a negative effect upon all the systems of the body. It is well known what happens to the heart and the breathing when one is in the throes of fear, anger or passion.

Through the practice of asanas a state of harmony between the body and the mind is established and maintained.

Something about pranayama

Simultaneously with the asanas, pranayama should be practised. Prana is the vital force, the energy that keeps bodies functioning. Prana is the living secret behind everything that moves, grows and plays its role in the universe. Without prana no life would be possible. Prana exists everywhere, in subtle as well as in gross things. Prana is not merely the air we breathe; air is only a part of prana. Prana is the energy which can be taken in through any part

of the body, not necessarily only through the nostrils and the mouth.

When we inhale and control the breath, the prana gets a chance to distribute itself throughout the whole body. Prana is necessary for both body and mind – for the body to make it light and to give it energy, and for the mind to create balance, strength and freshness. People who are short of breath feel weak and depressed most of the time.

To burn anything, one needs oxygen. The more oxygen is present, the more intense and strong the fire becomes and the more carbon dioxide, waste matter, is eliminated. Likewise, in the body, in order to keep all the systems well functioning, energy and heat which are products of fire are required. When we inhale deeply much oxygen is taken in. By retaining the breath, the muscles are held in a position of contraction which requires energy and causes more oxygen to be burned. Due to this the body temperature rises and more energy is awakened. The speed of the blood circulation increases; consequently more energy is supplied to all parts of the body and brain, which creates a feeling of freshness and relaxation, removing all kinds of tension and depression.

As such, all the systems become involved and undergo changes. Due to this, the condition of diseases in the body can be altered by pranayama.

By deep breathing, the movement caused by the diaphragm massages the organs such as the bowels, kidneys, liver and spleen. All the muscles of the abdomen are used so all the abdominal organs are massaged.

PART II

Teacher and pupil

The process of giving and receiving knowledge is such a sacred act in which one person leads another from intellectual darkness to illumination that the relationship of the two persons involved has to be close. But if the giver does not give for the sake of giving, he will not be able to give fully and the recipient will be unable to receive.

If a teacher cannot rouse interest for a particular subject in a student, it is often the fault of the teacher and not of the student. It only means that the teacher does not want to give fully of what he has, so how can the student receive properly?

If a child misbehaves according to the teacher, he is punished and that is that. But in truth, it only makes things worse. The teacher does not try to understand the child as to why it behaves in a particular way. Most of the time a child is subject to many pressures – fear from the compulsion he feels to do his homework, fear of the harsh teacher who does not understand him and punishes him when he has not learned his lesson, fear of his parents who will be angry or disappointed when he fails in his examinations, and so on. Deeper than that, a child's world is so complicated and filled with impressions, reactions and complexes that any grown-up would be amazed if he could peer into it and understand it. Sadly enough many teachers have forgotten their own childhoods, and their behaviour with children only creates big barriers and vast gaps between them and the children.

If compulsion and fear are the only methods that will bring a child to school and make him learn his lessons, then one cannot possibly expect him, under such pressures on the mind and body, to receive, accept and understand in full anything which is taught to him.

Education today

Education today too often only teaches the children how to make money. That is not to say that earning one's livelihood is undesirable or bad, but a great deal of money does not develop one's personality. It makes him materially rich but does not necessarily enrich him mentally or intellectually.

Education implies that the whole being should be educated. It should not merely be pumping students full of book knowledge which just floats on the surface of their intellects as oil floats on the water surface.

They have to be educated as to their thought patterns, their opinions, their ideas and their emotions. This kind of education will not come by forcing anything on them because that would only be borrowed knowledge which they might not even believe in. This education has to be brought about by them. They have to unfold it from within and one of the ways to accomplish that unfoldment is yoga.

In ancient times

Long ago in the forests and jungles dwelt the saints and realized souls. They lived in their small ashrams with a few disciples, passing on the knowledge to their charges like thread passes through beads. Kings and other people of high birth sent their children to those sages to become educated.

Think what those parents did. They put their children in the hands of those rishis in order to educate and prepare them to become leaders in society and rulers of kingdoms. And what did they bring forth? Examples like Lord Krishna and Sri Rama.

As man and society went together on the path of evolution things changed. Schools and colleges were built to give more children an equal chance to get an education and, in the course of time, to give every child that opportunity.

The gurukul system

What happened in the gurukuls? The student lived with his teacher. He served him and considered him to be his spiritual father. In turn for service and following the disciplines of a simple life, the student received training and knowledge from the guru.

The ashram life was such that there were not many distractions to divert the disciple's mind. He observed celibacy in order to keep his mind on his studies. The pupil surrendered himself totally to the guru and strove to keep his intellect completely open in order to receive and accept the teachings. That is the reason why Lord Krishna and Sri Rama were able to learn so many things in such short periods of time. Their teachers had complete control over them. There were no emotional, intellectual or social barriers in their minds to prevent the teachers from teaching or the students from learning anything whatsoever.

A very important factor about the gurukul system is that, apart from intellectual and practical knowledge, the students were taught about the soul – the spirit in man. They were taught through explanations of the scriptures, discussions with their teachers and through the practice of yoga.

That is what made their relationship so sacred – two human beings exploring the only common thing in them – the soul. And that is what made them human beings.

PART III

Swami Satyananda Saraswati

The cause of students' unrest and its remedy

We are passing through a period of unspecific unrest. Whoever you meet and talk to will express his dissatisfaction with the existing conditions of life. He appears to be incapable of adjusting himself to circumstances. He does not know the purpose of his life either. There is no mission or object to his life and he has no philosophy of life. He is afraid of others. He considers himself to be a victim of circumstances. The contemporary man is at breaking point every moment. Under such circumstances his spontaneous outbursts of wild anger are but natural. Our students are no exception to this phenomenon. There are other inherent causes for the manifestation of violent animal instincts in our young people which make them enemies of peace. We call it students' unrest.

There are people who do not attempt to go to the root of the problem, but who conveniently link the issue with the social, political or economic problems of the country. Some blame our system of education and suggest a change without, however, giving any concrete or definite solutions. Our system of education has already undergone various experiments. The remedies often proved to be worse than the disease. It is high time that the education experts sit together and work out the diagnosis and then prescribe effective remedies for the ailments. Our modern educational institutions have ceased to play their role effectively. They are nothing more than factories which produce moneymaking machines. When machines go out of order, they are apt to create problems. One should not wonder.

With the growth of science and technology the demands of society are constantly changing. A group of people trained for a particular trade today may be unfit and useless to a new industry tomorrow. The round screw prepared by

our educational institutions will not fit the square hole. The result is unemployment and the populace becomes panicky.

Even parents look at their children in terms of money. This is really painful. They should think that their wards are a spark of the divine soul – a being which has come from somewhere – and that they are only trustees of that soul as it undergoes the process of unfoldment. The contemporary methods of education allow a parent to give all the necessary comforts of life to his child, but what he gets in return is, at best, a degree-holder and egoist, a beautifully polished but undisciplined animal. Out of a hundred boys entrusted to the temples of learning, sixty of them are returned as outlaws. This brings to mind the statement that the ‘medical operation was a success but unfortunately the patient died’. The big universities, palatial institutions, pregnant libraries and great centres of learning may fulfil other purposes, but not the one for which they were instituted, if they fail to develop the real dignity in man.

Ideal education should be based on something more than commercial implications. Individuals in the world today are eagerly striving for unity within themselves and with others. They are sick and tired of the treasure-oriented life of man, but the structure of present-day life does not aid or facilitate outlets for the innermost urges of mankind.

The wrong concept of individual self-expression has done immeasurable harm to society as a whole. Sometimes ignorance is preferable to wrong or perverted knowledge. The modern educator’s concept of self-expression of the individuality of man is based on the body-mind complex. But there is also the changeless, eternal, ever-perfect substance, the soul, to be considered. There are needs for restraint of the personality on the one hand and for unfoldment of his being on the other.

We see everywhere in nature an ascending pattern, a progressive evolutionary movement from the mineral to the vegetable world, an upward trend which is said to culminate

in man. Man, considering himself thus to be the supreme peak, fails to think of any other further possible evolution and begins busying himself with external objects only. He tries to capture nature for his personal ends. This is very sad. He forgets to realize that he has yet a long way to climb. He is still unfinished material. His stage is only the beginning of true evolution. The door to higher evolution is only opened when he acquires his body. Until now he has reached the level of man through involuntary processes. He must act purposefully towards a definite end. His evolution is only just beginning. Education illuminates the inner genius already in man and helps in the process of evolution. It develops the integrated and balanced personality of man. Education aids towards making man divine.

It appears that there is something wrong somewhere in the system of our education which blocks the way of achieving the very purpose for which it was instituted. If the present-day unrest would be visible only in India, one might reasonably link it with social, political or economic conditions. The pattern of unrest in India may be different but the result is the same as elsewhere throughout the world. We have already seen what has happened in France, West Germany, USA, Japan, in the presidential dictatorship of Pakistan and even in a country like Sweden where there are practically no problems at all. On the slightest provocation, students in these countries stormed public and private buildings. In Sweden, students destroyed government and private property, just for the excitement or only out of curiosity. Why this need for excitement? Is it not the result of unbalanced personality?

Apart from the deficiencies in the methods of our education and the faults inherent in our educational attitudes, we cannot ignore the silent changes going on in the very structure of the human mind. This is no less a cause for what is happening in society and our young people are blamed for that. We must have a reasonable approach to the problem in order to come to a right conclusion.

To my mind, the problem is more in the nature of a psycho-physiological or biochemical problem than anything else. In the evolution of mankind the grey matter of his mind constantly changes and the vast development of his intellect makes the centre of sensibility of his mind more agitated.

This change has been more effectively and speedily going on among young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty which is discernable in their temperaments, their actions and their behaviour. They destroy even the most beautiful art gallery of antiquity on the slightest provocation. Going to church or to a temple is a sign of hypocrisy to them. They question the very existence of God, without knowing the meaning of supreme consciousness, the theory of relativity or scientists' efforts to jump beyond the mind. They are highly conscious of their rights but forget to think of their duties. They have lost their capacity for true discrimination.

When man loses his capacity for discrimination, when a particular nerve centre in his head which is responsible for his behaviour becomes agitated, no amount of preaching or intellectual injunction can possibly check him. At that particular moment, what is required is a purely scientific approach, as philosophy and religion have their limitations. For centuries we have been preaching our rich philosophy, but it has failed to attain the desired objectives. Now the time has come when we should adopt quite different attitudes based on the experiments and results of scientific research.

Our ancient system of hatha yoga is an answer. It purifies the body. The pranayama and the mudras silence the agitated centre of the mind and adjust faulty endocrine secretions. The practices automatically bring sobriety. Character and sobriety are the expression of the inner purity of mankind. These cannot be infused from outside with only speeches. The practices must be performed.

In Australia where the problem of unrest among the young people had become acute, some successful experiments were made with yoga. They introduced

pranayama in order to allay the restless minds of the young. It has the capacity to influence the nerves, glands and other physical functions of man. It can correct wrong behaviour, reset erroneous mental patterns and change attitudes towards persons and surroundings.

The mental condition of the human mind plays a very important role in appreciation of material set before a person and in his adjustment to circumstances. If we really want to curb the growing unrest among our young people, we will have to become aware of the agitated cerebral centres and control them in such a way that the students themselves will hate the attitude which causes agitation. The students themselves must be trained to become aware that they can perform reasonable actions for which they will be willing to accept responsibility.

Educators in turn must answer their own responsibility towards the students by actively guiding them with reliable and effective methods.

PART IV

ASANAS

Surya Namaskara (Prayer to the sun)

- Position 1** Face the sun if possible. Stand erect with legs together. Fold the hands.
- Position 2** Inhale while raising the arms. Arch the back and bend the head back.
- Position 3** Exhale while bending forward with straight legs until the head touches the knees. Place the hands in line with the feet.
- Position 4** Inhale while moving the right leg back, away from the body in a big backward stretch. The toes and knee touch the floor. Arch the back and look up.
- Position 5** Retain the breath. Bring the left leg back beside the right leg. Straighten the legs. Arch the back and press the chin to the chest.
- Position 6** Exhale while lowering the body to the floor, touching the knees, the chest and the chin to the floor.
- Position 7** Flatten the body. Inhale while bending backwards in the cobra position, the arms slightly bent at the elbow.
- Position 8** Exhale while lifting the body with straight legs. Arch the back and press the chin to the chest.
- Position 9** Inhale while bringing the right leg forward in one giant step, placing the foot between the palms. Arch the back and bend the head back.
- Position 10** Exhale while bringing the left leg forward to meet the right leg. Keep the knees straight and bend forward until the head touches the knees and the hands are in line with the feet.
- Position 11** Inhale while raising the arms overhead. Bend backwards.
- Position 12** Exhale while folding the hands on the chest. Stand erect.

Benefits: When one performs the twelve positions of surya namaskara coupled with the prescribed pranayama, every muscle, joint and all major internal organs are affected. It is for this reason that surya namaskara is one of the most important and beneficial practices to be learned and mastered, particularly by people who have only limited time to devote to the practice of asanas and pranayama.

Positions 1 and 12 establish a state of concentration, calmness and awareness of the practice being performed.

Positions 2 and 11 stretch the abdominal and intestinal muscles fully, exercise the arms and tone the spinal cord.

Positions 3 and 10 aid in preventing, relieving and eliminating stomach ailments, reduce surplus fat on the abdomen, improve digestion, aid in eliminating constipation, improve circulation and keep the spine supple.

Positions 4 and 9 tone the abdominal muscles, the muscles of the thighs and legs are strengthened, the spine is exercised and the spinal nerves are supplied with fresh blood.

Positions 5 and 8 strengthen the nerves and muscles of the arms and legs, exercise the spine and supply the spinal nerves well with fresh blood.

Positions 6 and 7 tone the shoulder and arm muscles and develop the chest.

Padmasana (lotus pose)

In a sitting position, place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. Place the hands on the knees. Close the eyes and try to sit quietly without moving the body for one or two minutes breathing very slowly all the while.

Benefits: It stimulates digestion.

Yoga Mudra (attitude of psychic union)

Sit in padmasana with both knees touching the floor. Hold one wrist with the opposite hand behind the back. Close the eyes. Inhale, exhale while bending forward until the forehead touches the floor. Retain the breath for a while but without any discomfort. Slowly return to the sitting position while inhaling.

Benefits: This exercise gives energy. The colon and intestines are massaged and toned thus aiding in the relief and elimination of constipation.

Matsyasana (fish pose)

Sit in padmasana. Bend the back using the support of the elbows until the crown of the head touches the floor. Keep the back well arched. To return to the sitting position, place the palms on the floor behind the back as a support.

Benefits: The practice of matsyasana stretches the intestines well and expands the lungs. If there is a tendency to bronchial contractions or asthma, this posture is especially recommended, also in case of bronchitis or other lung diseases.

Baddha Padmasana (locked lotus pose)

Sit in padmasana. Place the right hand behind the back and catch the right big toe. Place the left hand behind the back and catch the left big toe.

Benefits: Children with poorly developed chests should perform this asana. Shoulder, back and arm pains can also be alleviated.

Garbhasana (womb pose)

Sit in padmasana. Insert the arms to just past the elbows between the thighs and calves. Bend the elbows and catch hold of the ears and then balance the body on the buttocks. Retain the pose as long as possible with normal breathing, then lower the legs, release the arms and relax.

Benefits: This exercise is beneficial against nervous disorders and also helps to calm an excited angry mind. In case of habitual uncontrollable anger, one may practise this asana as many as sixty times a day in three sittings. The digestive fire is stimulated and the appetite increases.

Kukkutasana (cockerel pose)

Sit in padmasana. Insert the arms between the calves and thighs. Place the palms on the floor, fingers pointing forward. Inhale, raise the body from the floor and continue to balance on the hands.

Benefits: This exercise strengthens the shoulder and arm muscles and the hands. It develops the chest well.

Lolasana (swinging pose)

Sit in padmasana. Place the palms on the floor next to the thighs. Raise the body from the floor and balance on the hands. Swing the body between the arms as long as possible and then come back to the sitting position.

Benefits: This is especially good for children. Arms, wrists and shoulders are strengthened and trembling hands are rectified. The abdominal muscles are exercised.

Vajrasana (thunderbolt pose)

Assume a kneeling position. Place the feet with toes touching, heels apart and soles upward. Sit between the ankles and soles while keeping the knees together.

Benefits: By regularly sitting in this posture for ten to fifteen minutes after every meal, one can avoid, relieve and eliminate indigestion and constipation. It is effective against peptic ulcers or other stomach ailments. It sends added blood nourishment to the nerves and muscles of the thighs.

Supta Vajrasana (sleeping thunderbolt pose)

While in vajrasana, bend backward using the support of the elbows until the head touches the floor, and fully

arch the back. Knees should remain on the floor and the hands are placed on the thighs. Close the eyes and breathe normally.

Benefits: The intestines are completely stretched which aids the relief and elimination of constipation. The exercise is also to be practised in case of an over-active thyroid gland when matsyasana cannot be practised.

Shashankasana (pose of moon or hare pose)

Sit in vajrasana. Hold the wrist with the opposite hand behind the back. Close the eyes. Inhale, then exhale while bending forward until the forehead rests on the floor. Retain for a while and return slowly back to vajrasana while inhaling.

Benefits: This is especially good for women with an under-developed pelvis in which condition there is a tendency to abort or miscarry in pregnancy, to dislocate the uterus or to necessitate caesarean operations.

Simhagarjanasana (roaring lion pose)

Face the sun for healing purposes. Sit in vajrasana with knees apart. Place the hands between the knees with fingers pointing to the back. Lean forward, resting the body on the arms with the elbows locked. Tilt the head backward, open the mouth and stretch out the tongue as far as possible exposing both tongue and throat to the rays of the sun. Inhale very slowly and, while slowly exhaling, produce a clear steady vocal sound from the throat.

Benefits: This is especially recommended for children. It cures diseased or swollen tonsils when practised facing the sun. It is a good remedial aid against diseases of the throat, nose, ears, mouth or teeth. It is helpful in controlling stammering or stuttering.

Makarasana (crocodile pose)

Lie on the stomach. Raise the trunk, rest the head in the palms of the hands and place the elbows on the floor.

Benefits: This is an easy and effective posture for those suffering from slipped disc in which case one should remain in this position for extended lengths of time for best results, say half an hour or longer. This posture activates intestinal peristalsis and removes wind.

Naukasana (boat pose)

Lie on the back, arms at the sides, and palms down. Inhale and raise the arms from the floor more than one foot. The arms are to be held at the same level and in line with the toes. Retain the breath inside. Maintain this position as long as retention of breath is comfortable. The abdominal muscles should begin to vibrate slightly. Slowly lower the body and relax.

Variation: Naukasana with tension

Perform naukasana, inhale and tense all the muscles of the body, retain the breath as long as comfortably possible. In one sudden motion release the whole body, letting it drop on the floor. Relax completely while exhaling.

Benefits: This exercise is recommended for people with a stutter, also to those plagued by stomach or intestinal worms. It is beneficial for nervous or tense people as it brings for about a feeling of immediate relaxation.

Sarvangasana (shoulder stand pose)

Lie down flat on the back, hands beside the thighs, palms down. Raise the legs with bent knees and roll on the back up to the shoulders until the chin touches the chest. Use the hands as a support resting on the elbows. Straighten the legs vertically. The body should now be at a right angle to the head, neck, shoulders and elbows. The back should be straight with the chin pressing the chest. To return to the lying position, fold the knees over the head, place the hands on the floor, and lower the body and legs slowly to the floor.

Benefits: The practice of sarvangasana supplies the thyroid gland with a rich flow of blood thus stimulating and activating this gland which is responsible for respiratory exchange, genital and sexual development, and the growth of the bones. Therefore, young children whose bodies have not developed normally should practise this asana.

Halasana (plough pose)

Lie flat on the back. Raise both legs and guide them over the head until the toes touch the floor. Legs should remain straight. Support the back with the hands if necessary.

Benefits: This is recommended to diabetics. It aids the rejuvenation of the pancreas as well as the regulation of adrenal in the system. Daily practice is beneficial to girls who are established in maturity and also to people who wish to reduce weight.

Paschimottanasana (back stretching pose)

Lie down flat on the back. Extend the arms overhead and inhale. Come to a sitting position and exhale. While retaining the breath outside, bend forward and hold the toes and touch the forehead to the knees. In a single movement, return to a lying position and inhale.

Benefits: This is an effective asana against flatulence and for removal of excess fat. The spinal cord is made supple, the spinal nerves are nourished with an increased flow of blood, and backaches and pains are relieved. This asana is especially recommended for diabetic patients.

Ardha Matsyendrasana (half spinal twist)

Sit with stretched legs. Place the left foot on the floor on the outside of the right knee. Bend the right leg and place the right heel against the left buttock. Now bring the right shoulder against the outside of the left knee. Press the knee towards the right arm and hold the

left foot with the right hand. Turn the body to the left side, place the left arm at the back and look over the left shoulder. The head and the spinal cord should be twisted to the maximum.

Benefits: The lateral movements of the spine are developed and the spinal nerves are toned. The abdominal organs receive a natural massage and the secretion of adrenalin is regulated. The pancreas is well stimulated.

Bhujangasana (cobra pose)

Lie on the stomach with legs straight and toes extended. Place the hands on either side of the shoulders, palms down on the floor. With full inhalation and without lifting the navel from the floor, raise the chest and head so that the back is arched to the maximum.

Benefits: This is especially good for children suffering from an enlarged or diseased liver. It is beneficial to women for toning the ovaries and uterus. It stimulates the appetite and relieves constipation. The spine is kept supple.

Shalabhasana (locust pose)

Lie on the stomach with hands underneath the thighs, palms up. Inhale and lift the left leg as far as possible. Exhale and relax. Repeat with the right leg. Inhale, retain the breath and lift both legs keeping the trunk on the floor by pressing the hands against the floor. Maintain this position for five to thirty seconds. Exhale while slowly lowering the legs.

Benefits: The exercise is good for toning the abdominal organs, the liver, pancreas and kidneys. It aids in the relief and elimination of diseases of the stomach and bowels. It stimulates the appetite.

Dhanurasana (bow pose)

Lie on the stomach, bend the knees and hold the ankles with the hands. Head, chest and thighs are raised as far

as possible so that the body resembles a bow and the lower legs and arms the bowstring. Expand the chest and stretch the body by pulling on the ankles. The body will now rest only on the abdomen with the arms straight.

Benefits: The exercise is excellent for massaging the abdominal muscles and organs. It is beneficial for those suffering from gastro-intestinal diseases, and is effective in cases of chronic constipation and sluggishness of the liver. The spinal cord is kept supple.

Ushtrasana (camel pose)

Sit in vajrasana. While placing the hands on the heels, raise the thighs to a vertical position and arch the chest and back with the head tilted back. Breathe gently.

Benefits: It exercises the abdomen, relieves constipation and tones the abdominal viscera, the liver, the pancreas and the kidneys. It aids in relieving and eliminating sluggishness of the liver and diseases of the stomach and intestines. It rectifies a rounded back and gives effective relief against backaches.

Tadasana (palm tree pose)

Stand erect, rise on tiptoe and stretch the arms above the head with palms facing upwards, interlock the fingers. Stretch the body on tiptoe while the hands are overhead.

Benefits: As tadasana stretches the rectus abdomini, it opens the second and third sphincters of the digestive system. It also helps women to reduce heavy hips and oversized waists. Practice of this exercise is beneficial during the first six months of pregnancy.

Trikonasana (triangle pose)

Standing with the feet apart, raise the arms to shoulder level at the sides, fixing them in one straight line across. Turn the body to the left, knees bent slightly. Bring the right hand to the left foot, keeping the left arm in one

line with the right. Look up at the left hand, then return to a standing position and repeat on the opposite side.

Variation: Instead of raising the upper arm vertically, lower it over the ear horizontally, bringing it parallel to the floor.

Benefits: The spine is kept supple, the spinal nerves are toned and the abdominal organs are well massaged. Digestion is improved and the appetite is stimulated.

Garudasana (eagle pose)

From a standing position raise the right leg and twist it around the left leg, the right thigh being placed in front of the left thigh and the right foot coming around the back to rest on the calf of the left leg. Maintain this position while interlacing the arms in the same way, fold the arms at the elbows and twist the right arm around the left until the palms come together. Now bend the left leg and lower the body until the right toe touches the floor. Return to a standing position and repeat on the opposite side.

Benefits: The bones, muscles and nerves of the legs are strengthened. It is beneficial in cases of hydrocele, which is due to pressure being applied to the *vajra nadi*, the nerve or energy channel. In males it also supplies the testes glands with blood and the capacity for sensation. When this nadi does not function properly, the blood is turned into water in the testicles, which then grow to abnormal size.

Shavasana (corpse pose)

Lie on the back with palms up, eyes closed, and feet comfortably apart. Relax the whole body completely. Do not move any part of the body. Let the breath become rhythmic and natural. Concentrate the mind on the process of alternate breathing. This is done by mentally inhaling through the right nostril and mentally exhaling through the left, mentally inhaling through the left and mentally exhaling through the right nostril. This may be repeated as long as desired.

Benefits: This asana should be practised after completion of an asana session, after surya namaskara and also before sleeping. One is able to relax more completely in this position thus deriving maximum benefits from the time spent in sleep. When practised with concentration while awake, a nervous and tense mind can be calmed.

PRANAYAMA

Nadi Shodhana Pranayama (psychic network purification)

Sit in any comfortable asana with the spine erect and both knees pressed to the floor.

Stage 1: The left hand is placed on the left knee. The right hand is used to close the nostrils in the following way: the first and second fingers are placed in the centre of the eyebrows and remain in this position throughout the practice. The thumb is used to close the right nostril and the fourth finger is used to close the left nostril. Inhale through the left nostril and exhale through the same nostril, keeping the right nostril closed throughout. Repeat this five times. Then inhale and exhale through the right nostril, closing the left one. Repeat this five times. The process of inhaling and exhaling through each nostril is equal to one round.

Stage 2: Close the right nostril with the thumb. Inhale through the left nostril. Close the left nostril with the fourth finger and exhale through the right nostril. Inhale through the right nostril and exhale through the left nostril closing the right nostril. This is equal to one round.

Benefits: This breathing exercise induces a state of calmness and tranquillity.

Bhastrika Pranayama (bellows breath)

Sit in any comfortable asana with the spine erect and the knees pressed to the floor. Close the right nostril and take twenty rapid respirations through the left nostril. Repeat with the right nostril. Perform the rapid

respirations through both nostrils. The nostrils should not expand and contract during the practice but should be kept rigid.

Benefits: It purifies the lungs by eliminating unwanted gases, carbon dioxide. It relieves inflammation of the throat and increases the gastric fire. It is an effective exercise for the relief and elimination of many lung, throat and chest diseases.

Bhramari Pranayama (humming bee breath)

Sit in any comfortable asana with the spine erect and the knees pressed to the floor. Inhale fully through both nostrils. Plug the ears with the index fingers. With the teeth apart and the mouth closed, exhale completely while producing a humming sound like that of a bee. Exhalation should be slow and steady.

Benefits: Cerebral tensions caused by anger are relieved. It is beneficial for persons with high blood pressure caused by mental agitation and is very good for the vocal cords.

Sheetali Pranayama (cooling breath)

Sit in any comfortable asana with the spine erect and both knees pressed to the floor. Place the hands on the knees. With the tongue stretched out, fold the sides of the tongue into a tube. Inhale forcefully but steadily through the funnelled tongue as though trying to swallow air into the stomach. Release the tongue, close the mouth and exhale slowly through the nose.

Benefits: This purifies the blood and prevents and relieves high blood pressure. It induces mental, psychic and muscular calmness and eliminates the feeling of thirst.

Sheetkari Pranayama (hissing breath)

Sit in any comfortable asana with the spine erect and both knees pressed to the floor. Fold the tongue back and place it against the palate. Clench the teeth together and separate the lips as far apart as possible. Inhale by

drawing the breath in through the teeth. Close the lips and exhale slowly through the nose.

Benefits: It has the same effects and benefits as sheetali. It also keeps the teeth and gums healthy.

PART V

PRACTICAL TEACHING OF LESSONS

Introduction

The asanas and pranayamas prescribed in Part IV are to be taught to children over a period of one year. Yoga is not something like history or mathematics which can be learned through intellect and memory alone. It will have to be understood and practised with the whole being and for that there should be at least one exercise which can be performed daily.

The twenty-five asanas are prescribed in such a way that any child can easily understand and practise. Each morning, just before chanting of prayers, surya namaskara should be practised. The first two mornings may be devoted to teaching the asana. After that the children will be able to do it while the teacher simply calls out the numbers for the twelve positions. At least for two weeks a demonstrator should perform the exercise together with the children; after that they will be able to do it by themselves. Three rounds of surya namaskara should be done. One round includes two cycles of the twelve positions, so that it will be done six times in all. This should be followed by shavasana. After that everyone should sit down in any comfortable posture, with the spine erect and head straight. The knees are to be pressed to the floor and the hands placed either on the knees or in the lap.

For one week the children should become aware of their breathing only. They are to observe the flow of breath with closed eyes. They will have to experience it going in and out. After one week they are to start the first stage of nadi shodhana pranayama which is to be continued each morning for the rest of the year. They will practise two rounds of slow breathing, five times from the left nostril and five times from the right nostril. At the time of doing pranayama they should keep their eyes closed and be aware of the breath only.

There will be fifty lessons during one school year. The teacher has to be very careful to give equal attention to each child. The children should not overdo anything or strain themselves in any way. If a child cannot perform a particular posture, the teacher should not allow him to force himself in an attempt to do it because it might cause him harm. The teacher has to guide the children and at the same time do the practices with them so that both go through the same experiences. After each class there should always be an opportunity for the children to talk with the teacher in order to discuss eventual problems or misunderstandings.

Some hints

- The practice of asanas should be done on a blanket folded in four or a carpet doubled over – never on the bare floor or on just a thin sheet. The floor is too hard and a sheet will slip dangerously.
- Boys should wear only shorts.
- Girls should wear shorts and a blouse; otherwise Punjabi kurta and salwar.
- It is very important that before the practice of pranayama everyone empty his bladder.
- The asana session should be organized at a time when the stomach is empty or three hours after a meal.
- The periods after the fifty lessons may be used in taking notes on the asanas and in practising them on their own with only little supervision on the part of the teacher.

Lesson I

1. Shavasana

Before starting asanas the children should practise shavasana. It is very important that they should relax their bodies and their minds completely; otherwise they might strain a nerve or a muscle.

2. Surya Namaskara

To perfect the morning practice of surya namaskara, the

first two periods should be devoted solely to it so that there will be no difficulties in the future.

3. Shavasana
4. Seated in a comfortable asana the children should practise breath awareness. With eyes closed, they are to observe the flow of their breaths for about five minutes

Lesson 2

1. Shavasana
2. Surya Namaskara
3. Shavasana
4. Breath awareness. The teacher has to train the children in slow breathing. They will have to breathe in and out very deeply without raising their chests and without straining their lungs.

Lesson 3

1. Shavasana
2. Surya namaskara, two rounds (four cycles)
3. Padmasana. Padmasana has to be taught slowly.
The children should not try to force their limbs into positions which are not possible for them in the beginning. First, they will place one foot on the opposite thigh. If the knee does not touch the floor, the muscles should be trained by gently pressing the knee down with the hand. If a child can manage to sit in padmasana, he should not continue to do so for longer than five or six seconds at first. He may then relax his limbs for a time and do it again.
Finally, when all are able to do padmasana, they should sit straight with spines erect, heads up and hands on the knees. Let them compete as to who can sit for one full minute without moving even a single part of the body. The eyes should be kept closed.
4. Shavasana
5. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 4

Repetition of Lesson 3.

Lesson 5

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, two rounds. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, the breathing should be explained carefully to the children. No one should be allowed to retain the breath for a very long time. Those who cannot sit in padmasana can practise yoga mudra in vajrasana. 5. Shavasana, 6. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 6

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, two rounds. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Shavasana, 6. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 7

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, here the teacher has to be careful that children do not strain themselves. It is advisable to supervise his pupils one by one and help them to perform the asana perfectly. 6. Shavasana, 7. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 8

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Shavasana, 7. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 9

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, first the children should try to catch one toe with one hand, then the other one, ultimately grasping both toes at the same time. The children should not be allowed to continue this asana for too long a time without intervals of rest. 7. Shavasana, 8. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 10

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Shavasana, 8. Breath awareness with deep breathing.

Lesson 11

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbhasana, an asana which is easy for children to do. There should be no forcing of limbs. 8. Shavasana, 9. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, one round.

Lesson 12

Repetition of Lesson 11.

Lesson 13

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbhasana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Shavasana, 10. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, two rounds.

Lesson 14

Repetition of Lesson 13.

Lesson 15

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbhasana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Lolasana, 10. Shavasana, 11. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, two rounds; second stage, two rounds.

Lesson 16

Repetition of Lesson 15.

Lesson 17

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana,

7. Garbhasana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Lolasana, 10. Vajrasana, the children should be told to do this asana at home for about five to ten minutes after each meal, and it should be explained to them why to do so. 11. Shavasana, 12. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, two rounds; second stage, four rounds.

Lesson 18

Repetition of Lesson 17.

Lesson 19

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbhasana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Lolasana, 10. Vajrasana, 11. Supta Vajrasana, 12. Shavasana, 13. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, two rounds, second stage, five rounds. 14. Bhramari, three rounds.

Lesson 20

Repetition of Lesson 19.

Lesson 21

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, one round. 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbhasana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Lolasana, 10. Vajrasana, 11. Supta Vajrasana, 12. Shashankasana, 13. Shavasana, 14. Nadi Shodhana, first stage, two rounds; second stage, five rounds. 15. Bhramari, three rounds.

Lesson 22

Repetition of Lesson 21.

Lesson 23

Repeat 1 to 12 as in Lesson 21.

13. Simhagarjanasana, at first the children will laugh. They should then be told how good this asana is for their tonsils. They should be asked to practise it in the morning

while sitting on the roofs of their houses just when the sun rises, letting the rays of the sun shine into their throats. 14. Shavasana, 15. Nadi Shodhana, 16. Bhramari.

Lesson 24

Repetition of Lesson 23.

Lesson 25

Repeat 1 to 13 as in Lesson 23.

14. Paschimottanasana, 15. Shavasana, 16. Nadi Shodhana, 17. Bhramari.

Lesson 26

Repetition of Lesson 25.

Lesson 27

Repeat 1 to 14 as in Lesson 25.

15. Makarasana, 16. Shavasana, 17. Nadi Shodhana, 18. Bhramari, 19. Sheetal.

Lesson 28

Repetition of Lesson 27.

Lesson 29

Repeat 1 to 15 as in Lesson 27.

16. Naukasana, the children should not be allowed to hold their breaths longer than is comfortable. 17. Shavasana, 18. Nadi Shodhana, 19. Bhramari, 20. Sheetal.

Lesson 30

Repetition of Lesson 29.

Lesson 31

Repeat 1 to 16 as in Lesson 29.

17. Sarvangasana, 18. Shavasana, 19. Nadi Shodhana, 20. Bhramari, 21. Sheetal.

Lesson 32

Repetition of Lesson 31.

Lesson 33

Repeat 1 to 17 as in Lesson 31.

18. Halasana, 19. Shavasana, 20. Nadi Shodhana, 21. Bhramari, 22. Sheetal.

Lesson 34

Repetition of Lesson 33.

Lesson 35

Repeat 1 to 18 as in Lesson 33.

19. Ushtrasana, 20. Shavasana, 21. Nadi Shodhana, 22. Bhramari, 23. Sheetal, 24. Sheetkari.

Lesson 36

Repetition of Lesson 35.

Lesson 37

Repeat 1 to 19 as in Lesson 35.

20. Ardha Matsyendrasana, 21. Shavasana, 22. Nadi Shodhana, 23. Bhramari, 24. Sheetal, 25. Sheetkari.

Lesson 38

Repetition of Lesson 37.

Lesson 39

Repeat 1 to 20 as in Lesson 37.

21. Bhujangasana, 22. Shavasana, 23. Nadi Shodhana, 24. Bhramari, 25. Sheetal, 26. Sheetkari.

Lesson 40

Repetition of Lesson 39.

Lesson 41

Repeat 1 to 21 as in Lesson 39.

22. Shalabhasana, 23. Shavasana, 24. Nadi Shodhana, 25. Bhramari, 26. Sheetali, 27. Sheetkari.

Lesson 42

Repetition of Lesson 41.

Lesson 43

Repeat 1 to 22 as in Lesson 41.

23. Dhanurasana, 24. Shavasana, 25. Nadi Shodhana, 26. Bhramari, 27. Sheetali, 28. Sheetkari, 29. Bhastrika, first with the left nostril. Not more than ten fast breaths. Repeat with the right nostril.

Lesson 44:

Repetition of Lesson 43.

Lesson 45

Repeat 1 to 23 as in Lesson 43.

24. Tadasana, 25. Shavasana, 26. Nadi Shodhana, 27. Bhramari, 28. Sheetali, 29. Sheetkari, 30. Bhastrika, ten fast breaths in each nostril. Then ten fast breaths with both nostrils.

Lesson 46

Repetition of Lesson 45.

Lesson 47

Repeat 1 to 24 as in Lesson 45.

25. Trikonasana, 26. Shavasana, 27. Nadi Shodhana, 28. Bhramari, 29. Sheetali, 30. Sheetkari, 31. Bhastrika.

Lesson 48

Repetition of Lesson 47.

Lesson 49

1. Shavasana, 2. Surya Namaskara, 3. Padmasana, 4. Yoga Mudra, 5. Matsyasana, 6. Baddha Padmasana, 7. Garbh-

asana, 8. Kukkutasana, 9. Lolasana, 10. Vajrasana, 11. Supta Vajrasana, 12. Shashankasana, 13. Simhagarjanasana, 14. Paschimottanasana, 15. Makarasana, 16. Naukasana, 17. Sarvangasana, 18. Halasana, 19. Ushtrasana, 20. Ardha Matsyendrasana, 21. Bhujangasana, 22. Shalabhasana, 23. Dhanurasana, 24. Tadasana, 25. Trikonasana, 26. Garudasana, 27. Shavasana, 28. Nadi Shodhana, 29. Bhramari, 30. Sheetalī, 31. Sheetkari, 32. Bhastrika.

Lesson 50

Repetition of Lesson 49.

Yoga For Children

Swami Satyananda has a great interest in the future generation, the children. Lovingly he calls them 'divinity personified'. He often speaks to parents, teachers and children on the topic of their academic, personal and spiritual education. The following address was delivered to students and teachers of Vikram High School, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in February 1979. It is now being published for the first time.

I travel in a car driven by a trained driver. If my driver were not trained, you can imagine what terrible accidents might occur. Even if the driver is trained, but the car is not in order, I would not reach my destination. The case of the car and the driver also applies to every human being.

Training

Training is necessary and it must be perfect training. We need training in engineering, medicine and sports in order to achieve success. But do we have the proper training to guide our own minds, our own personalities? I would say certainly not. This is one of the reasons why we have not been able to harness the potentials of the mind.

The mind is a very powerful agent through which you can achieve fantastic successes in life. Systematic training of the mind in conjunction with your emotions is absolutely necessary. But if you think that the intellectual training given

in our academic institutions is the ultimate in your life, then you have made a wrong assessment. Intellectual training is a part of life, but it is not everything. Work is important for an individual, for a community. What is more important for a nation, however, is people with trained and disciplined minds. I don't believe in the discipline which does not spontaneously arise within. I am not talking about social discipline or civil discipline, but self-discipline, self-organization.

The practices of yoga definitely help to develop self-discipline. They also have many other profound effects on the mind and body, the following is just one example among many.

Balance

Normally around the age of seven or eight, the pineal gland in children starts to decay, and by the time the child reaches adolescence, its role in the body has diminished. The pineal gland is a tiny organ situated at the level where the head and neck join, directly behind and in line with the mid-eyebrow centre. It is a very important gland, believed to control all other endocrine glands and to influence the pituitary gland by delaying the onset of puberty.

When the functions of the pineal body undergo regression, children begin to attain a stage in life corresponding with the awakening of the reproductive system that is called an emotional upsurge. If this phase can be delayed for eight to ten years, then the emotional upsurge can become a matured emotional expression. Otherwise, children generally have an unbalanced psycho-emotional personality. They suffer from a type of psycho-emotional obsession as they try to adjust to their new sexual role in life. Educators and parents must teach children the way to maintain the health of the pineal gland so that this premature sexual development leading to psycho-emotional imbalance can be avoided.

Today, unfortunately, most of our children continue to develop in a very unbalanced way. They are physically undeveloped, mentally developed and emotionally confused. In yoga the most important practices for this problem are

pranayama, mantra and surya namaskara. In the olden days when a child reached the age of eight, he was taught these three techniques in a ceremony known as *upanayan*, the additional eyes. But in the course of time, due to inadequate explanation and lack of scientific interpretation, there arose a great misunderstanding. Children thought that these techniques were unnecessary religious practices. But recent scientific investigation and research has discovered that the practice of pranayama at this stage can maintain the health of the pineal gland for a further period of about ten years. If you can maintain the health of this gland for another ten years, I can assure you that you will not face emotional conflicts in your life, or what we call sexual hallucinations or obsessions. These states are completely psychological and emotional, and occur because the whole mechanism has gone out of control.

Pranayama and surya namaskara

Pranayama is practised in the morning, after you have finished your bath. Before beginning pranayama sit down in a comfortable posture or asana, either *padmasana*, the lotus posture, or *siddhasana*, the accomplished posture. However, if padmasana or siddhasana are not possible, you can assume *sukhasana*, the easy posture. The important point is to keep the spinal column upright and straight. You don't have to sit like a statue, but in a comfortable position with the back straight throughout the entire practice. Next, inhale through your left nostril, retain the breath for a few seconds, then exhale through the right nostril. Then inhale through the right nostril, retain for a few seconds, and exhale through the left nostril. This is one round. You should practise five rounds daily. This is the principle of pranayama. The breathing should not be forced in any way.

Surya namaskara, salutation to the sun, is a combination of twelve postures. It is a dynamic exercise and the most ancient exercise prevalent in this country. The sun is the source of vital energy. It is the source of prana, knowledge

and light. Scientifically, it is from the sun that we obtain many important radiations such as ultraviolet rays. The rising sun emits ultraviolet rays which are necessary for those people who suffer from deficiency of Vitamin D. They are also necessary for maintaining the health of bones and good eyesight. At sunrise face the sun directly and expose your body to it. Of course this does not apply in the chilly winter months. Practise the twelve surya namaskara postures, six rounds will take you about five minutes. This practice will revitalize the whole body and mind. It activates the solar energy within us which is responsible for our vitality.

Pranayama is necessary for the mind and surya namaskara is necessary for the body. Pranayama develops the mental shakti and surya namaskara develops the prana shakti. We are a combination of mind and vitality. If there is no prana there is no life. If there is no mind you can't think – you would exist as inorganic matter. When mind and prana come together, they make this dynamic and promising body. But at the same time it is also necessary to note that if prana and mind are not in balance with each other, disease results. If there is an excess of mental shakti and lack of prana shakti, you will think, imagine and fantasize too much, but will not be able to accomplish anything. As a result you may go crazy, become hysterical or even psychotic. There are many children and adults, who think too much but they can't do anything because they lack dynamism. They are not dynamic because there is no prana in them, no energy. This is one aspect.

On the other hand, what will happen if there is excess of prana but mental power is low? As an adult you will become a storm in society, as a child you will be the tempest in school, creating problems for your colleagues, teachers and society. With excess of prana, action in some form is necessary, but if there is nothing to do children just break and burn. Most people suffer from this imbalance in varying degrees. They have too much prana shakti or vitality and not enough mental shakti to balance it.

Gayatri mantra

In order to balance this excess of energy you will have to turn to the science of mantra. In ancient days the young children were taught the Gayatri mantra:

*Om bhur bhuwa swaha tat saviturvarenyam
bhargo devasya dheemahi dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.*

This mantra has nothing to do with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Communism. Anyone can practise Gayatri. It has a tremendous effect on the different centres of the brain: the centre of memory, reproduction, genius, understanding and the centre of interpretation. There are millions of ultrasonic and supersonic centres in the brain. Without these centres you would not be able to understand what I am saying to you at such a fast rate. It is like a computer always working. The Gayatri mantra has a composite and homogenous effect on the many centres in the brain. The last part of Gayatri mantra contains the word *dhiyo* which means intelligences, plural number. Not one intelligence, but many separate intelligent faculties like memory, quick grasping, recall, intuitive insight and communicative ability. There are hundreds and thousands of innate intelligences in us.

When you chant the Gayatri mantra you are creating a possibility of change in the structure of the brain, opening up areas such as nervous pathways and nerve secretions. The brainwaves undergo a change in formation, a change in pattern. When your brainwaves are adjusted and properly functioning, then your intelligences function miraculously.

This lack of adjustment is exactly the reason why, although you have previously understood and learned everything, at the time of examination it cannot be reproduced. At this time you are overcome by a fear psychosis and on account of this state the alpha waves diminish. When you are suffering from fear psychosis there is associated high anxiety and brainwaves undergo a state of delirium and derangement. This is the problem with many school children. It is the cause

of poor mental efficiency and the reason for bad results in examinations. They want to become first class firsts but they end up last class lasts. This is not a joke.

The Gayatri mantra can definitely help overcome these problems. It is equally useful and beneficial for young and old, believers and non-believers. Its effects have been scientifically proven. The Gayatri mantra will affect your brain as much as it will affect your mind, because it is a concrete and objective power or influence in the same way as penicillin or streptomycin or any other type of antibiotic affects each and every person equally regardless of race, age or religion.

Spiritual culture

So remember these three practices – pranayama, nadi shodhana for five rounds; surya namaskara, from six to twelve rounds; and Gayatri mantra, maximum is up to you to decide and the minimum is thirty-two for boys, girls, elders and everyone.

Yoga can contribute so much to the total development and training of children. You are the children of a very unique culture and age. To be spiritually enlightened children, you must learn to understand life with insight, to aspire to all that is great and noble. When the children live by this aspiration there is no reason why the world will not look to them for examples. Even today, when you have so many shortcomings and personality difficulties, the whole world is looking to you for light.

You are not being educated merely to become part of industry, not only to become engineers and doctors, teachers and professors, priests, sannyasins or factory workers. The aim of education should be to develop into a personality, a person who will comprise one unit among millions of people. A time must come when your personality should contribute to the personality of your nation. The personality of all human beings becomes the personality of the nation. There is a culture which is above military culture, which is above political culture and which is higher than a culture mainly

dependent on economics and industry. That culture is known as a spiritual culture, and you are its harbingers. You are the messengers of peace who were born to spread the yogic way of life to every corner of the world. Even those of you who do not practise yoga today can understand these words, and tomorrow you too will be amongst those who carry this message.





SATYANANDA YOGA
BIHAR YOGA

On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee World Yoga Convention 2013, Munger, Bihar School of Yoga is pleased to present *The Golden Collection*, a compilation of the first publications of Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati. Originally published in booklet format during the 1960's and 1970's, their modest nature made the wealth of the ancient science of yoga accessible to one and all. The depth in both knowledge and experience that is contained within these teachings is in itself unique and furthermore has paved the way for an entirely new understanding and approach towards the system of yoga. This collection of talks, lectures and letters is a truly historic contribution to the spiritual library of humankind.

Volume I of *The Golden Collection* is a shining example of Sri Swami Satyananda's methodical approach to the practice of asana, health management and the cultivation of a yogic lifestyle. Ahead of his time, he unveiled historical gems, scientific descriptions, detailed comments on health and practice notes for novices and adepts. He further recognized the importance of yoga in the holistic development of children, alongside the growing need for qualified yoga teachers of a high calibre. These classic teachings continue to be relevant, inspiring and uplifting for both yoga practitioners and teachers around the globe fifty years on.



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ISBN : 978-93-81620-50-2